Summer No. 2

WEIRD TERROR TALES

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by AUGUST DERLETH

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by PEARL N. SWET

THE LAUNDROMAT
by DICK DONLEY

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by SEWELL PEASELEE WRIGHT

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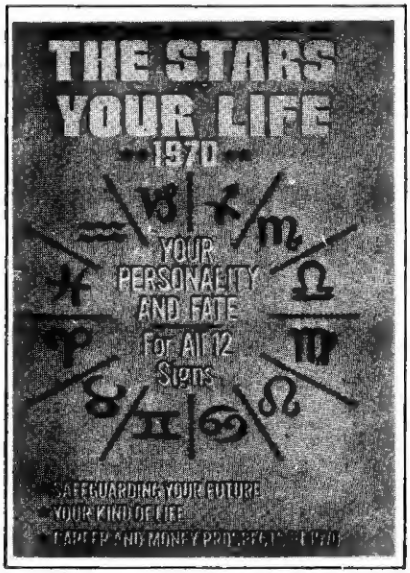

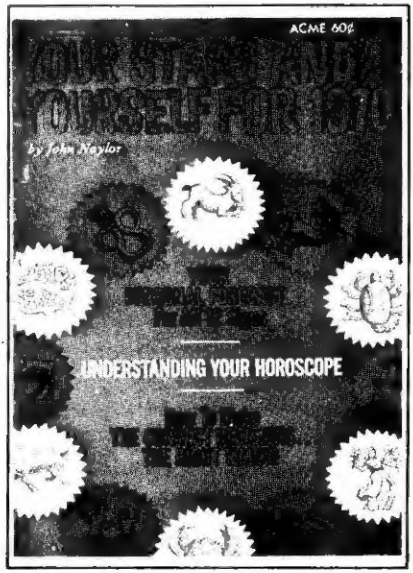

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WEIRD TERROR TALES

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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The Editor's Page

One of the oldest themes in weird and terror stories is that of "forbidden knowledge." The protagonist is a student of magic, or the black arts, or some real or imaginary school of occultism or metaphysics, or some aspect of natural philosophy extending into these areas, and he comes upon things which Man Is Not Supposed To Know. God, or various gods, or entities which play the same role, have laid down barriers which may not be crossed with impunity. The result is that frightful beings are called up, or the wrath of Divinity or Malignity is called down in no time at all upon the wicked interloper into forbidden areas.

Now it's perfectly true that almost anyone at any time might be able to start something he cannot stop, or discover something which he cannot control, or learn something which makes the universe seem so terrible to him that he goes mad, etc. This can happen in the realm of things which most of us consider entirely natural. People playing around with the subconscious, for example, have become unhinged as a result; no means of mass murder (or for that matter, individual assassination) that have been discovered can really said to be under control; and certainly people have discovered or started various chemical, etc., reactions which they found they could not stop. However, this isn't exactly it, although at times some of these things parallel the area of the weird terror tale. The main difference is that it is generally felt that efficient weapons are not in themselves frightfully evil, that research into the human psyche is worth while, and that drugs can be used benevolently – while the weird terror type of discovery in the unknown is more likely, according to fable and fiction, to uncover things which can never be put to any but evil purposes or arouse forces or entities which are *only* destructive.

The main trouble with such stories, to my way of thinking is a fundamental illogic; but then I'm inclined to think of such matters in the light esoteric Christian theology, where, despite an awful lot of nonsense (Sturgeon's Law applies here with a vengeance!) God is GOD. That is not, as it may appear to be, an A-is-A proposition, but a shorthand way of saying: given God, then this Being really is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Such a Being cannot be frustrated or mocked, and therefore such a Divinity's laws are really perfect. They need no enforcement or enforcement mechanism; there is no punishment for breaking these laws, because they cannot be broken in the first place. Therefore any "knowledge" which is really "forbidden" is knowledge which no man can possibly get to know, no matter how willing to learn.

But other religious myths and legends relate to super beings called gods, but which are clearly less than omnipotent; and the Christian Devil (or Satan) is a carry-over from the Persian God, who is distinctly less than omnipotent; since the Persian Good God, Ormzud, is in a constant struggle for existence with the Persian Evil God, Ahriman. The Power of Light and the Power of Darkness being equal, they are in unending

struggle for total control of the universe. Actually, the best of Jewish and Christian theology does not present the Devil as anything like an equal to God. Satan is represented as one of a superior order of beings called angels, but a bad angel (or devil) is analogous to a bad man—and Satan is the fuhrer of the devils; there is no question at all of the devils being equal to the Almighty, or of their having any chance whatsoever of victory in the end. They are more powerful than the human beings who collaborate with them; that is all.

The Gods and godlings and demons of other religious myth and legends are glorified human beings, sometimes more sometimes less good or wicked than the best or worst of men. But nearly all religions carry the legend of forbidden knowledge in one way or another, which is why this type of terror tale goes back so far and has endured so long. Yes, even unto this day, for I have encountered innumerable persons who consider themselves strict atheists and materialists who nonetheless have shown, at times, that deep down they really do feel that there are limits beyond which man ought not to go.

For we have to remember *if* there are such limits, *if* there is such forbidden knowledge, but there is *not* a universe of perfect (therefore truly unbreakable) law—with or without a First Cause, God, Great Spirit, Creator and so on unto a million names—then these old stories, crude as some of them may be, present very salutory admonitions. To my mind, the idea of such a universe is a horror story in itself. *Something* conscious or not conscious, animate or inanimate, or whatever, has made some rules about what we may or may not learn; but either that something, or something else, has also so made us so that we're filled with satiable curiosity, like the Elephant Child in Kipling's charming tale. This

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An Unusual Novelet

by Henry S. Whitehead

o

THE DUEL OF THE SORCERERS

A Thrilling Tale Of Magic In The Dark

by Paul Ernst

o

THE HUNTERS FROM BEYOND

An Eerie Tale

by Clark Ashton Smith

If You Cannot Find This Issue On Sale, See Page 125 Of This Magazine.

THE DEAD WALK SOFTLY

By Sewell Peaselee Wright

I DO NOT LIKE STRANGE BEDS. This was a very comfortable one, but it was not the simple, modernistic bed in my own rather austere bachelor apartment at home.

Set at an angle in one corner of the room, the two windows, one in the side of the house, facing the Atlantic, and the other in the end of the house, were too far away to give me the rush of fresh air to which I was accustomed. Brooke's summer place had been built, I remembered, in the days when night air was supposed to carry all manner of ills. However, I was weary from a hard drive, that day in 1931, and it was a matter of but a few minutes before I was asleep.

But I do not sleep well in a strange bed. I awakened presently and glanced at my wrist watch. It was twenty minutes of one by the green-glowing dial. I had been asleep but little more than an hour, and I felt uncomfortably wide awake.

Propping myself on one arm, I searched on the table beside the bed for cigarettes and matches. I have a bad habit of smoking in the middle of the night when I am restless, but even this small favor was to be denied me that night, for I could see, by the faint

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SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT had five stories in *WEIRD TALES,* the first being *The Thing in the Glass Box* (February 1926), and the last, *The Wolf,* (November 1927). He was first seen by science fiction readers in the March 1930 issue of *ASTOUNDING STORIES OF SUPER-SCIENCE* with *Out of the Ocean's Depths.* A sequel, *Into the Ocean's Depths,* appeared in the May 1930 issue, but it was with the publication of *The Forgotten Planet* (July 1930; reprinted in issue No. 9 of *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION)* that he started the series of stories, which would run intermittently up to the final Clayton issue of the magazine, that old-timers still remember fondly: the Commander John Hanson tales. The present story is his single appearance in *STRANGE TALES.* Many readers urged F. Orlin Tremaine, editor of the revived *ASTOUNDING STORIES* from 1933 to 1937, to continue the John Hanson series, but either S. P. Wright had lost interest, or Mr. Tremaine did not find submitted manuscripts of them satisfactory—or perhaps Wright was in a position where he was unable to write any further tales.

haze of moonlight from the windows, that the necessary articles were not there. Only the change, the keys, and the billfold I had placed there before retiring. My cigarettes I had tucked in a shirt pocket, I remembered all too well, now.

For a moment I considered the possibility of getting up and securing the cigarettes, but remembering how loudly the old floor creaked, I decided not to disturb the household with my foolishness, and closed my eyes with the fixed determination to get back to sleep in the shortest possible time.

I suppose everyone has had the experience of trying to force himself to sleep. It isn't much of a success. I lay there with my brain damnably alert, and free from every vestige of sleepiness.

It was close in the the room. Terribly close. These old houses . . . Firmly, I began counting sheep.

I had hopelessly counted the eighty-seventh sheep when I heard the latch on my door click softly. Instantly I opened my eyes and swung both feet to the floor.

"Brooke?" I asked quickly. There was no answer.

"Hello! Who's there?" Someone, I knew, had just closed that door. If it were not Brooke, then—

Hastily, I glanced at the little table beside the bed.

My billfold was gone!

I ran across the room, the old boards fairly shrieking beneath my feet. There was no one in the living room which had been an old New England formal parlor, and no one in the kitchen when I looked there. Nor was there anyone in sight outside, when I flung open the front door and looked around the moonlit, peaceful yard, with its old-fashioned flowers, closed and drooping sleepily on their stalks.

But there was a commotion now in the chambers over my head, and Brooke's voice was anxiously calling my name:

"Tom! What's the matter? What's up?" I heard his bare feet pattering down the stairs, and in a moment he had joined me in the kitchen.

"Sorry," I said, as calmly as I could. "We've had a visitor."

"A visitor?"

"A professional visitor," I nodded. "Lifted my roll, I imagine he'd put it."

"A—burglar?" asked Brooke.

"Right. But he's gone, so let's forget it."

"Hardly that," said my host. "How did you happen to discover your loss. Did he wake you up?"

"No; that's the odd—" I broke off suddenly, staring at Brooke, I imagine, as though I'd never seen him before.

Why, I'd been *awake* when the money was taken! Wide awake as I have ever been in my life. I knew, positively, that I had seen the billfold there on the table when I searched for cigarettes. No possible doubt about that. And yet . . .

"What's the matter, Tom?" asked Brooke hastily. "What are you thinking about?"

"You'll say I've been dreaming," I replied gravely, "but I'll swear there's something strange about this. I woke up, and looked for a cigarette on the little table beside the bed. There were none there; I'd left them in my shirt pocket—but my billfold was on the table then. I saw it as plainly as I see you.

"Then I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep. Couldn't however—you know how it is, sometimes. Then I heard the door shut, and I jumped out of bed. There was no one in the room, and—the money was gone."

"Came right into the room while you were awake, eh?" said Brooke. "Pity you didn't happen to open your eyes and grab him."

"Yes," I said, not looking at Brooke now. "But have you ever noticed how the floor creaks in that room of mine? A cat couldn't have crossed it without attracting my attention; not in that silence."

"But—but what—what do you mean?" stammered Brooke. "If you didn't drop off—"

"I know I didn't," I interrupted almost grimly.

"Then how could a man have walked across the room without your knowing it?"

"He couldn't," I said flatly.

"Ah!" said an eerie voice from the closed stairway. *"But the dead walk softly!"*

We whirled, startled and frightened, toward the source of the voice. There in the stairway, holding an old gray bathrobe around her slim body, was Aunt Nettie, nodding at us wisely.

"What are you doing here?" asked Brooke sharply, glaring at his housekeeper. "And what made you say that?"

"I thought you might be needin' of me, what with all these goin's on all hours of the night," she replied crisply. "I didn't know but what the house was afire."

"And what made you say—what you did?"

"I heard what Mr. Jordan was tellin' you, and it just popped out natural-like. You 'member what happened to young David Pierce, don't you? And what the poor dear girl who was with him said? The gun dropped to the ground—without her bein' able to see the hand that dropped it—and the only track they could find for all their lookin' and searchin' was not so deep as a baby would 'a' made, and a naked foot, at that! The dead do walk softly, when they walk, Mr. Gregory!"

"Nonsense!" snapped Brooke, in the harshest voice I had ever heard him use. "We'll excuse you now, Aunt Nettie. Tell Mrs. Gregory there's nothing to be alarmed about; Mr. Jordan merely had a nightmare. Understand?"

"Sure, Mr. Gregory," she said, nodding, her dark eyes

searching my face. "A nightmare, was it?" And still nodding, she slipped silently up the stairs.

"Odd creature," commented Brooke. "Full of an old woman's superstitious ideas. Startled me, though, when she chimed in so unexpectedly." He drew his hand across his forehead, which I could see was beaded with perspiration. And the night was cool. "I guess we'd best forget it until morning; there seems to be nothing to be done just now, eh?"

"Right. Sorry to have disturbed you. I was a bit startled myself. Run along and forget it. See you in the morning."

I went back to my room, and lit the lamp. It seemed to me there was a strange, unpleasant odor hanging in the air—probably the smell of the clam-flats at low tide. I got out my cigarettes, and carefully examined both the windows. They were my only hope. But the screens were firmly in place, and undisturbed. Whoever—or whatever—had taken my billfold, had come and left through the door. And the boards of the floor had not creaked!

I do not feel ashamed to say that old Aunt Nettie's words kept coming back to me, sending icy tricklings along my spine, and that I spent the remainder of the night in an old splint-bottomed rocker beside the window through which the moonlight came, smoking one cigarette after another, and thinking, thinking, until daylight came and the mist began to lift from the ocean before me.

Brooke came down early and invited me for a swim. It was just what I needed, and I accepted the invitation with alacrity.

"Who was this David Pierce your housekeeper mentioned last night?" I asked as we walked down the steep, crooked path to the shore. "And what about this business of a gun that dropped from an invisible hand, or something of the sort?"

Brooke looked out across the gray Atlantic, just beginning to glow with the light of the morning sun.

"It's a local mystery," he said slowly. "You remember meeting Colchester, the poet, yesterday?"

"Surely," I nodded. Immediately after my arrival, Brooke and Irene, his wife, had taken me for a stroll along the shore. We had run into the man Brooke had mentioned: a powerfully built man

with a great mane of white hair, and a short beard of iron gray.

Colchester was not a man easily forgotten. His deep-set eyes were blue and most electrically brilliant; his mouth generous and very expressive. Only in the height of his forehead and the length of the wavy white locks which framed his face, was there the suggestion of the poet.

"Well," said Brooke, "this chap Pierce was the man to whom Colchester's daughter, Marie, was engaged. Young fellow from the village, here; owned a store, and was doing quite well.

"Marie isn't a particularly attractive girl, and I fancy she hasn't had many suitors. The old man objected to the proposed match, but Marie finally told him she was going to marry young Pierce whether or not. Marie has money of her own—I'm not sure, but I think most, if not all, of the Colchester money is in her name. Probably that was one very good reason why Colchester opposed the match. The poetry business isn't a particularly profitable one, from what I hear."

We paused by the edge of the water, and Brooke glanced at me with a peculiar look in his eyes.

"The rest of the story is hard to believe," he commented, "but this is the way it goes: the night before the wedding, Colchester went to town, leaving the two turtle doves to coo. Marie and young Pierce were in the garden, according to her story, seated on a stone bench overlooking the ocean, when suddenly, without the least warning, there was the crash of a revolver, and Pierce sagged forward. Marie caught him in her arms, instinctively glancing back into the young firs which grow in a little semicircle behind the bench.

She says she saw the gun—an old revolver made thirty years ago—fall to the ground, and saw the branches of the firs switch back into place. But—that was all. And the moon was shining brightly."

"Pierce was dead?"

"A bullet through the brain," nodded Brooke.

"You think . . . it couldn't have been . . .?"

"Colchester? No. Couldn't imagine him in that role, and

besides, he was in town when it happened. That was proved beyond doubt."

"Any footprints, or anything like that?"

"No." Brooke laughed queerly, it seemed to me, and gazed down reflectively at the sand. "They found powder-stains on the fronds of one of the firs, proving that Marie's story as to where the shooting had occurred was true. But although the ground all around was damp sand, wet by a rain the forenoon before, there was no trace of footprints. Except"—and again Brooke laughed that queer, apologetic laugh—"that one man swore he found a very faint imprint, just where the killer must have stood to fire the fatal shot. But the impression he claimed to see was of a *naked foot!*" He turned abruptly, and waded into the surf. "Let's swim," he said. "Breakfast'll be ready in a few minutes."

2

BREAKFAST WAS READY and waiting by the time we finished our swim and changed into presentable costumes.

Brooke had apparently convinced Irene that the adventure of the night before was no more than a nightmare, for she mentioned the matter only once, and then lightly.

"Lots of news in the paper this morning," she said when the meal was finished.

"There were two robberies in the village; two tourists were the victims. One lost nearly two hundred dollars, and the other over three hundred, and jewels valued at nearly fifteen hundred dollars. Then—"

"Nothing strange about that, dear," chuckled Brooke, with a swift, warning glance in my direction. "Robbing tourists is a legitimate business around here."

"This is no joking matter," protested Irene seriously. "The other story is even stranger. You remember we were reading the other day of the very wealthy Mrs. What's-her-name, who has that huge summer place near the old lighthouse, and who is entertaining Madame Lombard, the famous spiritualistic medium? Well, they had a seance last night, and right in the

middle of it—but wait; I'll read the newspaper account to you."

She left the table and picked up the paper. Brooke and I stared at each other uncomfortably as we waited for her to find the item she had mentioned.

"Here it is; listen:

> " 'The medium, Madame Lombard, had already passed into the trance state, and was under the influence of her control, when one of the women of the party, aroused by a peculiar and exceedingly disagreeable odor, looked up and screamed. Instantly there was pandemonium, for each of the ten persons present is prepared to swear that there was a ghostly figure in the room. "It was the figure of a man," one of the guests revealed to a reporter from the *Express*. "The room was dimly lighted, but we could see the ghastly figure very plainly. He was about medium height, with long, snaky-looking hair hanging down his cheeks. He was utterly unclothed, and I distinctly saw the face of a big grandfather's clock through his body. The figure was as transparent as a clear jelly."
>
> " 'Police are working on a theory they refused to divulge, in an effort to recover the jewelry the ghostly figure tore from the necks and fingers of the shrieking guests, all of whom were women. The touch of the strange being was said to be cold and clammy; several women fainted at the contact and were so much affected they are still under the care of Dr. Bell.' "

Irene folded the paper.

"The thief, whoever or whatever you wish to call it, took over thirty thousand dollars' worth of jewels, the headline says. It's rather serious—and very odd, isn't it?"

A sudden crunch of gravel by the door interrupted the conversation before either of us could reply. We all turned, and rose quickly. Framed in the doorway was one of the most beautiful young women I have ever seen—and a bachelor of my

age, reasonably presentable and not without a fair share of the world's goods, generally has many opportunities to meet charming young women.

"Why, Anita! What a wonderful surprise!" Irene was at the door instantly. "But, dear! You're ill!"

It was certainly true that the young woman appeared to have recently experienced a grave illness. Her eyes were sunken and darkly circled; her lips were pale and moved in an uncertain smile.

"I—I know it," she said in a beautiful low voice. She glanced at me as she entered, and hesitated. "Oh!" she exclaimed softly. "I—I wouldn't have come if I'd known—"

"Don't be absurd!" said Irene firmly. "Anita, this is a very old and very dear friend of ours, Tom Jordan. Tom, you've heard us speak of Anita Claymore, the artist?"

I had; they had raved about her, and now I understood why. She was beautiful, exquisite, despite the ravages of some terrible, recent experience.

The usual introductory remarks over, Anita turned to Irene. Her lips were trembling, and there was a haunted look about her eyes.

"You're the only friend I have here, Irene," she said. "I guess that's why I've come to you with my troubles. I don't know what's happened to me.

"Yesterday I felt wonderfully well and full of ambition; I worked like a demon, as I always do when I'm happy. I even resented stopping work long enough to be civil to Mr. Colchester, when he happened by where I was working, down on the shore. He stayed some time, and kept me from my work so long I didn't feel like starting in again."

She paused, and frowned, as though trying to bring something to her memory.

"I picked up my things and went back to the house. I ate my evening meal, and fussed around the garden for a time, until it grew too dark to work. And—and after that I don't seem to remember what happened.

"I have a vague recollection of driving through the

darkness . . . driving . . . And then I must have come home, for I awoke in bed, utterly exhausted, so weak I could hardly move. And when I looked in my mirror—oh, I must have had some terrible nightmare. But it has me worried, awfully upset. I look so ghastly!"

"You were ill, of course," said Irene quickly. "What's more, you still are. And I'm going to drive you home this minute and put you in bed."

Anita protested, but Irene usually has her own way. In a very short time the two girls were whirring down the lane in Brooke's car.

"Well," said Brooke with a gruffness which poorly concealed his real feelings, "what do you make of it, Tom?"

"Of what?"

"Don't spar!" Brooke whipped out a cigarette and lit it with nervous quickness, tossing me the pack. "Let's talk fast while Irene is out of hearing."

"I don't know what to think," I said as I drew deeply on my own cigarette. "But—something's in the wind, Brooke. Something damnably strange."

"In the wind?" repeated Brooke savagely, pulling on his cigarette until it glowed. "You're right there's something in the wind. In the night wind. And something damnably strange, as you say. The question is: what are we going to do about it?"

"Is there any need to do anything? We've had our visit—"

"We've had one visit. We could have another. And only God knows what might happen a second time. Young Pierce . . . Anita . . . it isn't only money and jewels, Tom!"

"What? You're going back and linking the murder with—with these other things?"

"You remember the story I told you?" asked Brooke queerly. "A nearly invisible *thing* that could carry away a billfold or thirty thousand dollars' worth of jewels could also—pull the trigger of a revolver."

"But, good God, man—"

Brooke held up his hand. "Wrong answer, Tom," he said solemnly. "We're dealing with quite a different Power."

I stared at Brooke, my heart thumping suddenly against my ribs. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not sure, Tom. But there are a great many things modern science can't explain. Some of the old tales, the old superstitions, have endured too long to be utterly without foundation."

"You don't believe in—in ghosts?"

"No; no more than those women who had their jewels snatched from them by a *thing* which emitted an evil odor, a *thing* through which they could see as through a jelly; a thing with a cold, damp touch which sent women into hysterics. No more than young Pierce. And no more than you, who told me *something* came across a floor that would squeak under the tread of even a child, while you lay in bed awake, in the silence of the night, and yet heard no sound."

"True," I muttered. "True. And you think there's more to come?"

"I don't know. But I believe it's a possibility, and a dangerous possibility. You saw Anita. What happened to her?"

"Something ghastly. But who—or what," I cried desperately, thinking of the cruel lines on Anita Claymore's face, "is back of all this?"

Brooke's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Now you're asking a question I can't answer. But I do believe this: the old graveyard up the road is concerned in the ugly business somehow."

"What?"

Brooke nodded. "You've seen it; we drove by it yesterday afternoon, bringing you in. Remember it?"

I nodded. It was a weed-grown, forgotten old cemetery, with a decayed picket fence, and leaning, neglected headstones—one of the hundreds to be found in New England.

"There are strange stories afoot about that cemetery," continued Brooke. "I'm not a superstitious man, but I think I wouldn't care to live where Colchester does, almost on the edge of the dismal place. Aunt Net knows all the gossip, of course, and she swears that lately more than one person has seen strange figures roaming there."

"White-sheeted ghosts! Good Lord, man, every old cemetery has stories like that clustering about it!"

"No." Brooke shook his head doggedly. "Not white-sheeted ghosts. That's the peculiar part of it. These are the figures of naked men—and their bodies are transparent. Like a clear jelly!"

I thought of the newspaper account Irene had read to us, and I'll confess a little icy trickle ran down my spine. Brooks was in such deadly earnest!

"Even admitting that," I said, "what's to be done about it?"

"We'll have to find out," replied Brooke. "We'll have to know more, first. But the old graveyard's our starting place."

"Starting place?" I echoed blankly.

"Right," nodded Brooke grimly. "We'll keep watch there and see—what we shall see. One there, the other here, to make sure nothing happens . . ."

"To Irene," I finished as he hesitated, hating to put the thought into words.

"To Irene." He nodded again, a haunted look in his eyes. "Oh, I feel like taking her away, sending her away, before something happens. Do you believe in premonitions, Tom?"

"I've had many hunches come true."

"Hunches, premonitions — call them what you will. I believe in them. Always have. And I'm worried about Irene."

"Then why don't you take her away, as you suggested?"

"She wouldn't go," groaned Brooke. "She's a proud-spirited little thing, Tom; a thoroughbred. I'd have to give her some reason, you see. She wouldn't run from danger; I couldn't make her."

"True, she's a game little thing, Brooke. And here she comes now."

I glanced through the open door, through which came the pinging sound of plump tires on rough gravel.

"How'll we arrange things?" I added.

"You'll help?"

"Of course; anything you say goes with me, Brooke."

"Then you watch in the cemetery tonight. We'll turn in early; and as soon as possible, get out of the house and stroll up that

way. Be as quiet as you can, and don't show yourself. You're not afraid?"

"I'm not crazy about the idea of spending a night in a dew-drenched cemetery, but I'm not afraid of ha'nts, if that's what you mean."

"Good. And keep your eyes open, Tom. Don't take any chances. We're up against something, if I'm guessing right, that one man can't lick." Then, as Irene's shadow fell across the threshold, "Sure, I'll take you for a spin in the old tub," he said carelessly. "Back so soon, dear?' How's Anita?"

"In bed," said Irene, studying us with suspicious eyes. "What have you two been talking about?"

"About going for a trip down the bay," lied Brooke easily. "All set?"

"I'll stay home and housekeep, if you don't mind," decided Irene. "Aunt Net and I have some work planned. Riddin' up after two men, as she says, is a big job. You two run along; I'll go with you some other time." She seemed to have her mind made up, so Brooke and I did not debate the matter with her.

We cruised around rather aimlessly until nearly noon, almost silently taking in the many beauties of the lower bay. Now and then Brooke pointed out some spot of interest or particular charm, or gave to an island or headland its proper name; that was about all. Neither of us was in a conversational mood.

Irene had lunch ready when we returned.

"You're fortunate to have anything at all to eat," said Irene. "I've been pestered with visitors. Some of Aunt Net's relatives drove by in their brand-new car, and wanted her to take a spin, so of course I told her to go. Then Mr. Colchester strolled up from the shore to present me with that volume of his things he promised us. Just after Aunt Net returned, Anita, the thoughtful darling, sent Mrs. Witt over to tell me she was feeling very much better, and not to worry. It's been a hectic forenoon; it's a wonder I accomplished anything."

"You should have come with us," said Brooke. He was studying Irene with puzzled worried eyes. "What's the matter, dear?" he added gently. "You look tired. You're not worrying

about that—that silly business you were talking of this morning?"

"No," said Irene hastily, turning away. "I feel fine, Brooke, really. Just a bit upset about Anita, I guess."

"Of course," nodded Brooke. "But she's better, you said. Don't worry any more."

He dropped the subject there, but his eyes seldom left her face during the entire meal, and the worried look deepened in his eyes.

3

AT THE CORNER OF THE GRAVEYARD, I paused, seeking a gap in the gray palings. With the dew-drenched weeds clinging to my ankles, I left the road, bent low to pass under the top rail of the fence, and strained my eyes to locate some point of vantage.

A few feet away, a dim, unused path led, between a double row of graves, back toward the center of the cemetery. Picking my way as carefully and quietly as possible, I soon found myself at the spot I had selected for my vigil: a family lot, guarded by an ornamental iron fence of which only the vestiges now remained, and marked by four busy cedars, one on each corner of the lot. I had dropped safely to the ground, close to one of these concealing treetrunks, when the moon freed itself from the clouds, which had obscured it, and sailed, brilliant and serene, over the distant bay.

Making sure I was in deep shadow, I carefully looked around, studying my surroundings.

All around me were these silent records of men and women who had lived and had died, and who had found their last resting place in this patch of forgotten earth. Fat stones, thin stones, some black, and some nearly white, all of them leaning as though ready to fall back upon the earth from which they had come, as those whose resting place they marked had been received into the receptacle of all earthly things.

Somewhere a night bird shrieked raucously, like a rusty hinge

swinging in the wind; the sound startled me so that I barely suppressed a cry. It seemed to me the very earth gave up a faint but distinguishable miasmatic stench, the musty and horrible aroma of decay. My lungs were filled with it; it was mounting dizzily to my brain.

Coldly, bringing all my logic to bear, I told myself I must snap out of it. But I kept thinking: "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Around me, beneath this fecund sod, was no more than dust. Dust. No more. These reeling stones, with their pools of curdled shadow at their feet, were but slabs of granite

illustration by Amos Sewell

and marble, quarried from the earth and marked with the chisel. This ground should be feared less than other spots, for this had been consecrated: it was God's acre.

But with terror rising in my soul, I realized cold logic and reasoning were availing me nothing. There was something in the air; something more than the fetid odor of decay which assailed my nostrils, something more than the gentle rustling of the black, shadowy fronds above my head. All about me was something malignant . . . full of enimity . . .

Shivering, my hands shaking, I slowly rose to my feet.

I looked around, cursing myself for a fool. The cold sweat of terror prickled my forehead, and my hands, pressed behind me against the rough bark of the cedar, shook as with an ague.

The odor of death, which I had noted before, was even stronger now. It seemed to be coming down the wind. And the wind was blowing from behind me.

I had an insane, an almost irresistible desire to turn, but my pride would not permit. I might be a fool, but not so great a fool as that.

And now another cause for fear was added to my burden. A black cloud slid across the moon, and darkness closed in upon the pitiful relics around me—and as it did so, I heard a soft whispering sound, as of feet treading very softly upon drenched grass.

With a gasp I turned, pride and will-power deserting me. Face to face with the wind, the reek of decay struck me with almost tangible force. Shaking like the fronds of the cedar above me, I moved slowly around the trunk of the tree, my eyes, wide with fear, searching the darkness.

Then I saw it. It was coming toward me. The cloud over the moon was thinning; I could distinctly see the rank grass bending beneath its feet!

I say *it*, for though this thing bore the shape and form of a man, it was not human. It came swiftly, a naked figure with long, gnarled arms and gaunt legs knotted with stringy muscle. Its hands were held out toward me, the long fingers working, twitching like talons, hungry for my throat.

A shriek of pure terror stuck in my dry throat as I started to run. This thing was a peril to my sanity, to my life. It was not of earth, for despite its human form, my eyes could pierce its body *like a jelly!*

A dozen great leaps, spurred by fear, and I almost reached the fence. Somehow, I felt that if I could only escape from this spot of moldering stones and rank weeds which fed upon the dead, I would be safe. I would breathe the fresh air from the ocean, feel clean earth beneath my feet—be free!

A trailing briar twined around my legs, throwing me off balance. I gasped and tried to save myself from falling, but too late. I crashed solidly to earth, glancing over my shoulder as I did so.

The thing was upon me! It was running with outstretched arms, head bent forward eagerly. Its eyes were smudges of smoky blue fire, its mouth a black and toothless shadow. As it threw itself upon me, I leaped up, beating at it with both fists, my breath coming in great gasps which seemed to tear my throat.

The touch of it was cold and slimy, like thin wet rubber. The smell of death and decay emanated from it nauseatingly. And it gibbered in obscene whispers as it fought.

Back and forth we raged, stumbling over sunken graves, jostling against headstones, tripping in the long, clinging grass, drenched and slippery with dew. Then, suddenly, the thing reached down, and swept up a long, sharp sliver of black stone, a portion of a fallen headstone, cracked by the frost. I cried out again, and tried to leap away, but the thing was after me like a flash.

The heavy stone crashed against my head just above the ear, and the universe shattered in a blast of sound and jagged blue flame.

Something cold was patting my face. Something cold, gratefully cold. My head was afire, swollen with fire and pain.

For a moment, as I opened my eyes, I did not remember what had happened. There was a face bending over mine: a woman's face, pitying, marked with deep lines of suffering. She was

patting my forehead with a handkerchief wet, I gathered, in the dew.

The whole thing came back to me as I saw where I was, and I jerked to a sitting position, despite the girl's cry of protest.

"Who are you?" I asked sharply. "And what are you doing here?" I looked around fearfully as I spoke, dreading what I might see. Beside me was the long fragment of stone; there was no other evidence, save my thumping head, of my ghastly visitor.

"I am Marie Colchester." Despite the unwarranted sharpness of my questioning, there was no resentment in the girl's voice. She spoke in a low, dreary monotone, her lips barely moving, her face never altering its expression. "I heard you shout, and came to see if I could help. We live at the other end of the cemetery; almost adjacent to it."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Colchester," I said quickly, "for speaking as I did. I -I have just been through an unnerving experience. How—how long was I unconscious?"

"I should say about ten minutes. And no apology is necessary; I understand. Do you live near?"

"Quite near; I'm visiting the Gregorys."

"Oh, then you're Mr. Jordan. Father mentioned you."

"Right!" I managed to get to my feet, shaking my head fiercely in an effort to stop its spinning. "You have been very kind to a stranger, Miss Colchester; may I see you safely home?"

"No; that's not necessary." For the first time I glimpsed a sign of emotion in her sunken, lusterless eyes. For some reason I could not fathom, she was afraid to have me come to her home. "But if you think you're able to make your own way back, I must be leaving you. Father might come home—" She stopped short, and turned swiftly away. "Good night, Mr. Jordan," she added jerkily, and with bowed head made her way toward the dark, visible house.

I stared after her until the shadows swallowed her up; then with a last shuddering look around the silent graveyard I hurried in the opposite direction.

It was queer that she had asked no questions. She had heard me cry out in the night, and had come to aid me, finding me

beaten to the ground, senseless, in an ancient cemetery, and yet she had asked no questions as to how I happened there, or the cause of my injury. She had taken it for granted, almost as a matter of course.

I stumbled on, trying to clarify the thoughts which swarmed my aching head, but no order came of that chaos. All the things which had happened, all the facts in my possession, seemed utterly unrelated.

I turned off the road, into the lane which led to Brooke's house. I could see it, clear and sharp against the sky, drowsing beneath the moon.

Softly, I opened the screen door. Rather to my surprise, the other door was ajar. "Brooke!" I whispered. There was no response.

He was upstairs, I decided, keeping close watch over his sleeping wife. I knew, however, he would hear my movements below, so I crossed the old-fashioned kitchen, which served us as a dining room, and opened the door which gave on the closed stairway.

"Brooke!" I repeated, in a soft voice.

A terrible feeling of dread swept over me then. Somehow, I knew I spoke into an empty chamber.

"Brooke!" I fairly shouted the word—and still there was no answer.

Snatching a flashlight from the mantle, I ran upstairs, flashing the beam wildly. The door into Brooke's chamber was wide open, and I did not hesitate, though I dreaded what I might find there.

Their bed had been slept in—by one person, for only one pillow was dented. The covers were drawn back very neatly, as though the sleeper had aroused and very carefully turned them back. Beside the bed a chair had been drawn up, but it, too, was empty!

Aunt Nettie, I knew, slept in a little unfinished chamber over the summer kitchen. Calling her name, I rapped loudly on her door, and then flung it wide. Her bed also had been slept in, but she was not there now.

Irene was gone. Brooke was gone. Aunt Nettie was gone.

I stood in a deserted house; as deserted as a grave which has given up its dead—and as silent.

Wildly, muttering under my breath like a drunken man, I dashed down the steep, narrow stairs, and out into the stolid, peaceful moonlight.

The dooryard was as tranquil and undisturbed as though the shadow of tragedy and mystery had never crossed this ancient threshold, before which I stood.

I felt impotent, confused. They were gone, and I knew not which way to turn, or where to seek them. My friends were in trouble, and I could not even guess their fate.

As I stood there, trying desperately to decide upon some course of action, I heard the soft beat of steps upon the hard, sun-baked earth. Someone was running toward me, and running at top speed.

"Brooke!" I shouted, but it was not Brooke who darted around the corner of the house. It was Aunt Nettie, her bare legs showing beneath her old gray wrapper, and her grizzled hair streaming witchlike beneath a night cap of some flowered stuff.

"Oh, Mr. Jordan!" she gasped. "She's gone, too. Mis' Witt is 'most crazy. That's twice, and the poor dear was so weak she could hardly walk. Oh, what's come upon us, what's come upon us?"

She sank upon the doorstep, panting, her shoulders quivering, her head sunk in her hands.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Who's gone? Where are Mr. and Mrs. Gregory? And where have you been?"

"I don't know! Oh, I'll try to tell you just how it was, but my mind's all of a flutter. I was sound asleep in my room when first thing I knew there was a terrible poundin' on my door. It was Mr. Gregory, and he was that wild-lookin' I hardly knew him.

" 'Do you know where Mrs. Gregory is?" he shouted at me. 'She's gone! I must have dozed for a moment, and when I awoke, the bed was empty.'

"I told him I hadn't seen or heard a thing, and he dashed down the stairs like a man out of his senses. 'You go over to Miss

Claymore's!' he yelled back at me. 'She might be there. I'll go the other way, down along the shore.'

"Well, I just slipped into my kimono and my slippers and ran over to Miss Claymore's place shakin' so I could hardly keep my feet under me. I heard a motorboat runnin', but it wasn't Mr. Gregory's; his makes a deep, kind of powerful sound. This was one of them outboard motors, that sound almost like an airyplane goin' over, so it wasn't him. I don't know what's become of him, Lord help us all!

"I roused up Mis' Witt—her who's helpin' Miss Claymore, you know—and she said Miss Claymore had gone to bed right early. But somethin' told me we'd better make sure, so we went up to her chamber and rapped. She didn't answer, so we walked in. Her bed had been slept in, but she wasn't anywhere around.

"Then I heard you callin' Mr. Gregory's name—it's an amazin' thing how a voice will carry when a night's so still—and I came back as fast as I could. Oh, there's the devil's hand in all this, Mr. Jordan, and I know it!"

"Don't be silly, Aunt Nettie! We've got to do something to help. You have no idea which way Mr. Gregory went?"

"No more'n I told you. But don't be callin' me silly; there *is* the devil's hand in all these goin's on around here lately. Only the devil would use the dead for his own mean ends—the devil, or somebody in the devil's favor!"

"But who?" I asked, capitulating. "Who's at the bottom of all this?"

The old woman rose suddenly to her feet, her eyes blazing into mine from beneath the ludicrous nightcap.

"Who? I'll tell you who I reckon it is: that poet fellow! Didn't he hate poor David Pierce, and warn't he killed the very eve of his weddin'? Ain't he hard-pressed for money, and owin' everybody, to account for all these robberies, and strange goin's on? Didn't Mis' Witt tell me he talked with poor Miss Claymore yesterday, just before she went off so strangely, and came back some ungodly hour lookin' like she'd been through a terrible sickness? And didn't he come nosin' around here talkin' to Mis' Gregory, the Lord love her, just this very blessed afternoon? And

ain't his poor daughter just about crazy, worryin' about something' a whole lot more terrible than just losin' her man, like she did? And what's more, don't he have a boat with one of them outboard motors onto it, just like I heard tonight?"

She thrust her head like a malignant snake about to strike, shaking a long, skinny finger fairly in my face.

"I've seen him before this, roamin' in the old buryin' ground, and a-settin' there on the old graves, all by himself. There was vi'lent men put away there; men who weren't afraid to break the law or slit a throat, in their time . . ."

I was no longer paying any attention to the garrulous old woman. Colchester! Could it be that he was the instigator of all these terrifying happenings?

"You stay here!" I interrupted her. "If they should return, tell them I'm at the Colchester place." And without waiting for a reply, I hurried down the steep, crooked, pathway to the shore.

4

FORTUNATELY, I HAD TAKEN the flashlight with me; by its aid I was able to pick my way rapidly along the beach, trotting most of the way.

I paused for an instant at the foot of the path which led up to the great gray house beside the graveyard. Colchester's boat-buoy bobbed gracefully in the moonlight—empty!

The Colchester place presented its long face to the ocean. A hospitable porch, shrouded in shadow now, ran the whole length; above, a row of unlighted windows glared blankly in the light of the moon.

To my right was a great grove of pines, their tips touched with silver; the mass of them black against the midnight sky. Beyond, I knew, was the old cemetery. To my left was an oldfashioned garden, surrounded by a creeper-grown stone wall.

I paused on the lowest step leading to the porch; my attention distracted by a faint sound coming in from the garden; a low, undulating moaning sound, as of someone in pain. An eerie, unearthly sound, at that hour. Silently, I entered the garden. The

sound, unmistakably, was that of a woman sobbing in bitter grief. I paused, every instinct arguing against intrusion; then, remembering my errand, I strode briskly forward.

With a startled cry, Marie Colchester rose from the little bench of natural stone upon which she had been seated. Behind it, the clump of firs clustered in the arc of a circle, and I realized that I beheld the scene of young Pierce's death.

"You!" she whispered, her tortured eyes searching my face, her hands, clenched and white, held closely to her sides. "Why are you here? Why did you come back? Can't you see—" instinctively, she glanced behind her, toward the firs, through which the fatal bullet had sped.

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. But if it were not important, no business would bring me calling at such an hour. Where is your father, Miss Colchester?" I shot the question at her suddenly, with a quick change of voice, and her face went whiter still beneath the light of the moon.

"My father?" she repeated, in a sort of daze. "Why do you wish to see him, Mr. Jordan?"

For a moment I hesitated. Surely this unfortunate woman had had enough grief in her life! But her eyes as well as her words demanded an answer.

"Miss Colchester," I said slowly, looking beyond her, at the motionless firs, "there have been many strange things happening in this vicinity, the past few days. Very strange things.

"Last night, as perhaps you know, Miss Claymore had an unnerving experience, about which she remembers next to nothing, but which sent her to bed, a nervous and physical wreck. Tonight, she is gone again, and with her, the wife of my dearest friend."

"Not Mrs. Gregory?" gasped Colchester's daughter, her long, white hand fluttering to her breast.

"Yes!" I said sharply, taking a step toward her, and laying both hands on her thin, sharp shoulder. "Anita and Irene. Both. And Brooke—Mr. Gregory—is missing also. I have reason to believe you know who is responsible for all these happenings. Tell me the truth: do you know?"

She turned her head away, quickly, breathing tremulously, like a runner who has finished a desperate race.

"This is perhaps a matter of life and death," I reminded her gently, as she hesitated. My heart went out to her in sympathy, but I steeled myself to go on. "Tell me: do you know who is responsible?"

Slowly, like an automation, she nodded. "Yes," she said. "Yes, my father—God help him!"

"Are you sure?" I whispered, trying to get a grip on myself.

"Sure," she repeated—and crumpled suddenly, at full length, on the bench, her whole emaciated body shaken with sobs. I knelt beside her, helpless in the presence of her grief.

"I'm sorry, Miss Colchester. This is a terrible thing. But you must help me more. Where is he? Where are my friends?"

She shook her head, choking on her words.

"Please!" I pleaded with her. "You must. My friends are in danger. Where are they?"

"In the cavern." She did not lift her head, and her voice broke on every word. "Old White Horse . . . you know it?"

"Yes." Brooke had pointed out the great old promontory the afternoon before.

"There are caves along the shore. The waves . . . the tides . . . made them. There is one . . . that isn't known. Father discovered it . . . years ago. There is a great boulder . . . shaped something like a bell . . . before the entrance. The entrance is behind this bell-shaped boulder . . . very small. There is a curving passageway . . . and then a large cavern. I have been there. That's where he is . . . where the others are. I know because one night . . . he went on foot . . . the motor had broken down . . . and I . . . I followed him. Oh, God . . . God forgive him!"

5

I HATED TO LEAVE HER, but I had wasted precious minutes already. I took the path to the shore in a dozen steps, and in a few seconds was back at Brooke's place.

Aunt Nettie was seated in the moonlight on the doorstep, and she looked up quickly as I came running up the path.

"I know where they are!" I cried. "You were right. And if you want to do a fine thing, and aren't afraid, run over to the Colchester place. Miss Colchester's there alone, and she's not well. Her mind's gone, I'm afraid."

"Poor dear! Of course I'll go. I'm not afraid; there's nothin' that'll hurt an old woman." She got briskly to her feet, and I jumped into my car, tossing the flashlight on the seat beside me.

I found, a few minutes later, a narrow road which seemed to lead from the main highway out into the rocky promontory known as White Horse. It was a winding road, running through a dense growth of evergreens which switched viciously at the sides of the car, but I took it at reckless speed. It ended in a clear space at the very tip of the headland, from whence, I imagine, there was a beautiful view of the bay and its islands.

I turned off the ignition and jerked on the emergency brake; almost before the wheels stopped moving, I was out of the car and working my way swiftly down the precipitous side of the cliff.

The first thing I saw when I felt the comparatively level floor of the beach beneath my feet, was Colchester's little boat, drawn high on the shore.

About a hundred yards away, in a little cove, I located a rock, perhaps ten feet high, which flared out at the bottom, and narrowed in to a sort of dome at the top. Undoubtedly, this was the bell-shaped rock Colchester's daughter had described.

On all fours, I crept behind the rock, and found, without difficulty, the entrance to the curving passageway the girl had mentioned. So far, at least, she had spoken the truth.

Pausing for a moment, I listened intently. It seemed to me I could hear the soft rumble of a human voice, but I could not make out the words.

Slowly, my pulse hammering in my throat, I moved forward. I entered the passageway, and worked my way inward perhaps ten feet. Here I could see, just beyond the curve, a faint glow of white light, and the voice was quite distinct—familiar.

I recognized it instantly; it was Colchester's soft, musical speech, and the first word I heard was Brooke's name!

"Mr. Gregory," he was saying, "you are an unfortunate man. You really should not have interfered. I realize this must be a most unpleasant experience for you."

"I'll tear your throat out, for this night's work," came back Brooke's deep, savage rumble. "I will, God help me, I will!"

"On the contrary," murmured Colchester. "I have it all arranged. You'll be found drowned, probably some time tomorrow. Your boat, a side caved in by a reef, will be found washed ashore. Your charming wife, here, will testify you went fishing early in the morning—and did not return. It will be most unfortunate. I trust you have adequate insurance?"

Brooke snarled something I did not catch.

"Ah," reproached Colchester, "you should not curse when your end is so near! Tomorrow you pierce the shining veil; in one swift gesture you attain a height of knowledge known to no mortal man. Even to me, and as you know, I have stumbled upon some most interesting facts!

"It's a pity we moderns give no more serious consideration to the knowledge of the ancients, is it not? In some of these old books is undreamed of wisdom; the charlatans we scorn today were not without their little stores of knowledge. I think I told you I found the secret of my experiment upon a stand in the city for a few cents. Amazing, is it not?

"A great deal of chaff, true; but the one grain of wheat was well worth the winnowing. And lest you believe the first experiment was but an accident, let me show you how well it works in the second case. Miss Claymore has once before kindly consented to be a donor; I would not impose upon her again so soon did I not have a special need of her. See, Gregory, how simple this thing is!"

All the time Colchester had been speaking, I had been inching my way forward. As he finished, I had progressed to a point where I could peer directly into the cavern; indeed, I was within a few feet of the exit, and only the comparative gloom kept me from instant discovery.

The cavern was, as the girl had said, fairly large; perhaps twice the height of a man from floor to rocky roof, and roughly circular in shape, perhaps ten yards across.

In the center a gasoline lantern shed a white, unmerciful light upon two still figures lying side by side. The first was Irene, her head thrown back in an unnatural position, her mouth open, her lower jaw hanging pendulous. Her eyes were closed, and the lids were blue and sunken. Beside her was Anita.

Anita was resting peacefully, as though she slept, and she seemed more rested, less exhausted, then when I had seen her last. Brooke, hands and legs bound with anchor rope, was propped up against one wall, his face haggard, and his terrified gaze fixed on Colchester, who stood, suave and immaculately dressed, beside Anita.

"First," continued Colchester, "as I believe I explained, it is necessary to control the will of the subject by hypnotic suggestion. Had you been less stubborn, less fractious, I should have used you, and you would have saved me the decidedly unpleasant necessity of doing away with you. Yours, now, will be the second shuffling off which has been forced upon me. The ladies were more amiable; indeed, they were both under the influence before they were aware of what had happened, and, of course, remembered nothing of what had occurred, at my command. Just as they remembered my command to be at a certain place at a certain time. Another little trick of the charlatans, hypnotism; laughed at by one age, and accepted by the next, even by the ultra-conservative medical profession, which hailed it as a panacea!

"And now, see!" Colchester drew from his pocket a little case of wood and flicked open the lid. "You saw this heavy, bluish powder before, I believe. Two very common herbs, a mineral substance, and the dried pulp of a tropical fruit, also not uncommon, combined in equal proportions. No more." He bent swiftly, before I could guess his intent, and forced a pinch of the stuff between Anita's lips.

As I gathered my legs beneath me for a leap, Brooke groaned a

protest. Colchester whirled like a flash, holding up his hand in warning, arresting my spring.

"Silence!" he ordered sharply. "Any voice save mine, now, might have a most unfortunate effect. The least shock . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "Her death would be on your hands, Gregory."

Brooke stared at him, his lips working, but held his peace. He felt, as I did, the gravity of Colchester's words. He dared not speak, for Anita's sake; and I, for the same reason, dared not move.

"You see," went on Colchester silkily, watching Anita's expressionless face, "this simple little compound has a very peculiar effect on one who has been rendered hypnotically sensitive to it. A child, now, would be sensitive, without hypnotic suggestions; we older people have learned to guard our vital forces better.

"Life, the ancients held, departed through the mouth. We laugh at that today—not you, however, and not myself. We have seen, have we not?" He laughed softly, twining his fingers in his beard.

"And this life is a precious thing. It is not ours without envy; there are those who have lost it, and have found no other life, who envy us our pitiful spark, and—but I believe I told you of that.

"Sometimes these others find a means of securing strength from those who have it. Most often, I believe, from babies. Sleeping babies. When I was younger, I remember hearing old women saying that cats sucked a baby's breath; those old women were most unjust, for they maligned a faithful creature susceptible to the presence of these others who would steal the strength of the living, and were merely doing their instinctive best to guard the infant they loved. It was only when these feline guardians were driven away that the babies suffered—and then the old women said they had driven the cat away too late. We're an ungrateful race, Gregory, are we not? And lacking in understanding?

"And now—careful, Gregory! No move; no sound. This is the

critical moment. Can you see the expression in her face? She hates to bow the knee; she is fighting . . . fighting . . . as they all do. My own daughter so far forgot herself, and so as perhaps you noticed, did your charming wife, so soon to be a widow. Useless, Gregory, useless; it is a hopeless fight."

I could see Anita's face, and the sight of it chilled me. Her body did not move, but her eyelids quivered, and her lips twitched as though she forced them shut against some inner power which would open them.

My fingers itched to close upon the throat of this gloating monster who stood over her, but I was afraid to move; afraid, almost to breathe.

"See!" cried Colchester. "Her lips open! Slowly, reluctantly, but they open. And the vapor, that blue vapor, rises for a hungry one to seize upon. He is here with us now; has been here, invisibly watching, awaiting this moment, all the time. Watch, Gregory, watch! In our time, only your eyes and mine have seen this bit of necromancy! One from beyond feeding on the strength of a mortal!"

I clenched my teeth, my one hand knotted so that I felt the nails bite into the flesh, the other closing around the body of the flashlight until the metal gave silently beneath the pressure.

Anita's lips were slowly opening, and from them was pouring a thin blue vapor, not unlike the smoke of a cigarette, save that it rose slowly, instead of swiftly. And, a few inches from her mouth, it disappeared completely, abruptly.

"He is here," chuckled Colchester. "Gleason, his name is, onetime smuggler and cutthroat. You'll see him presently, Gregory, just as you saw Kindred. A pair of feckless rakes, and eager still to lay their hands upon the property of another even though they have nothing to gain but the experience. You saw the jewels they have brought me, Gregory, the jewels, and the money? Sadly needed, too; Marie's little fortune is nearly gone, you see, and I am used to the little luxuries of life.

"Kindred is an eager one; that's why I called him first and sent him on a mission so quickly. Eager and disobedient, he prefers to roam aimlessly, centering his activities around the place where lie

his ashes. Gleason is easier to handle. You haven't tired in this hour and more of waiting? I trust not; I've tried to be entertaining. It was Kindred who removed the objectionable Mr. Pierce; it will be Kindred, I think, who'll attend your unfortunate end, Gregory.

"But look! Can you see him now? The faint outlines—there! You're not too far away?"

I think Brooke saw, for a little gasp escaped him. My own eyes were fixed on the unholy sight before me.

Crouching hungrily over Anita's still body was a shadowy figure, the naked figure of a man, the outlines barely visible, but growing more distinct every instant. It was a brother, unmistakably, to the monstrous thing which had come across me in the graveyard and struck me down. Less potent as yet, and less visible, but born of the same unholy power.

And it was sucking into its hungry, gaping mouth, the vapor which poured slowly upward from Anita's parted lips!

6

I WATCHED IN PARALYZED SILENCE as the thing grew more distinct. Details filled in slowly; the hideous features picked themselves out, and the corded muscles along the tense legs were as clear as the intent wrinkles at the outer corners of Colchester's narrowed eyes.

"Enough," he said, and reached in his pocket for a tiny vial. The thing glanced up at him, and held out a clawlike hand in protest; but Colchester thrust it aside, and tilted the vial to Anita's lips.

"Enough, I said! There'll be another time, Gleason. You've strength enough now to last until daybreak. You see," he added, speaking to Brooke over his shoulder, "they can't create energy to make up for what they use. Perhaps that's as well, for they're rowdy and mischievous creatures—aren't you, Gleason?"

The creature straightened up, gazing at Colchester with arms set akimbo.

"Truth, sirrah," he said in a sibilant voice that was less in

volume than a whisper, " 'tis a hard question you do be asking. Be ye not something of a rascal in your own right, since ye ask?"

"That's neither here nor there," said Colchester sharply. "You'll take orders from me or else I'll get another to fill your place."

The thing cringed, and Colchester chuckled, running his fingers through his beard.

"See how well I use the hold I have over them, Gregory? Speak up man; the critical period has passed. The fluid neutralized the powder."

It was true that the bluish vapor no longer rose from Anita's parted lips, but what a change had taken place in those few minutes!

There were great hollows around her eyes, and her cheeks had fallen in against her open jaws. Her face was utterly colorless, even to her lips.

"Vile . . . vile . . . " whispered Brooke over and over again, like a man in a dream. "Vile."

"No. Selfish, perhaps, but not vile. In two days, three at the most, neither of these two charming subjects will show the least sign of this experience; nor will they suffer from it in any way. I know, because my daughter and others have served several times. Your widow will look charming in her weeds, Gregory! And now, Gleason, listen." He turned to the thing which stood beside him, patiently waiting, and gave me the chance for which I was looking. "There's a new cottage about a mile—"

At that moment I leaped, and brought the flashlight, my only weapon, crashing against Colchester's head. The blow sent him sprawling, groggy, but not unconscious, for he fumbled in his hip pocket where I caught the outline of a gun.

I heard Brooke shout something; I'm not sure what, for the creature Colchester had animated was upon me in a flash.

It came straight for my throat. Its cold, rubbery fingers closed tenaciously around my neck, like the tentacles of an octupus. I tore them away with one hand, beating at the ghastly face with my other fist. It was like striking a punching bag; the face gave

beneath the blows, but always returned, as though on a spring.

Colchester had his gun out now, and was trying to lift himself into a position to fire. Brooke was shouting a warning, and struggling desperately to free himself from his bonds. And the clammy fingers of the thing were tearing at my throat.

The same ghastly odor I had noticed in the graveyard was rank in my nostrils, and it brought out the cold sweat on my forehead. I realized, now, I was fighting something which had been dead for a century and a half, perhaps more; fighting for my life against a being conjured up from the grave . . .

There was a great roar of sound, and I realized Colchester had fired. The bullet was wide, however; it struck a rocky wall and sent a shower of rock-dust flying.

Colchester fired a second shot, but again it was wild. I had struck him a terrific blow, and undoubtedly his head was spinning dizzily.

All the time the thing was trying desperately to get a death-grip upon my throat, while I dodged and whirled about the cavern, trying to keep myself free from that ghastly embrace, and at the same time make myself a difficult mark for Colchester.

He was on his feet now, leaning heavily against the rocky wall of the cavern, his head wabbling uncertainly on his shoulders, his beard daubed and heavy with blood, and his blue eyes fairly blazing with hate.

My heart sank as he slowly lifted and leveled his gun. At such close range, he could not keep on missing me—yet if I closed with him, his unholy ally would strangle me.

Better, I decided, the crashing, merciful death of a bullet than to die beneath the rubbery talons of this monster from beyond the grave. Colchester fired, and this time it was not a miss. I felt the searing pain of it slashing across my left shoulder, and I realized dully that it must have passed clear through the body of my antagonist without in any way harming him.

But a moment later, just as Colchester steadied his gun, holding it in both hands, I noticed something was happening to the thing with which I fought. It was fading!

7

EVERY SECOND IT WAS GROWING LESS DISTINCT; its efforts to reach my throat were weaker. For an instant, I thought the bullet had injured it, after all, and then I realized that such a being could not be harmed by a leaden slug. A man cannot die twice.

I remembered, then, what Colchester had told Brooke. These beings could not replace used energy. They absorbed so much, and when it was used, they became as they were: invisible and impotent spirits of the air.

These minutes of terrific fighting had sapped the energy this thing had drawn from Anita's unconscious body. My own body was shaking from the unusual exertion, but heart and lungs kept supplying me with new strength. I had won!

With a shout I flung the thing from me; it went spinning away like a whirl of smoke. Just as Colchester fired for a fourth time, I rushed him, knocking the gun upward so that the bullet crashed point-blank on the roof.

I was terribly weary, but Colchester was in no better shape, from the effects of the blow I had dealt him. I put every ounce of strength I could command into a short right jab to the jaw, and with a sharp, gusty grunt, he crumpled to the floor.

It would have been a hard thing to convince me, a few days before, that I could have been induced to strike, in anger, a man whose hair was white, and whose beard was grizzled with age, but I stood there for an instant staring down at Colchester's motionless figure, with a feeling of savage satisfaction which was more animal than human.

I have never, to this day, regretted the act.

Brooke, despite all he had been through, had the cooler head. "Let's not talk about it—about anything that's past. Not just now. We've got to think ahead. To think of *them.*"

I nodded. Somehow, we must, if possible, save the girls from any knowledge of this night's happenings.

Colchester moved slightly, and groaned. I sprang to his side and bent over him with the gun just as he opened his eyes.

"Take it easy!" I snapped. "You've had your fun!"

"You are strong," he said gently. "Poor Gleason had no chance. But be careful of the gun, Mr. Jordan; it would be most unfortunate should I be snuffed out just now." His slow gaze traveled significantly to the two girls, still silent and motionless on the rocky floor of the cavern. "I am still master of their minds, you know."

"But not for long," gritted Brooke, swinging up. "Speak to them, and tell them they will awaken in thirty minutes, remembering nothing of what's happened. We'll camouflage the rest, somehow."

"And in return, what?" asked Colchester softly. "My freedom? Your story wouldn't stand up in any court of law, anyway; they'd laugh you off the witness stand. You realize that?"

Brooke glanced at me, hesitantly. I shook my head, slowly, solemnly. "We'll make no bargains with you. Tom, let me have that gun."

Wonderingly, I passed him the gun, and stood aside.

"No bargains," he repeated. "Just a proposition. Either you'll do what I tell you, exactly what I tell you, and take your chances with the law, or by the living, Almighty God, I'll kill you where you stand!"

There was no doubt in my mind that Brooke meant exactly, literally, what he said. If ever grim determination shone in a man's eye, or limned the set of his jaw, then Brooke spoke no more and no less than the simple truth.

Colchester saw death in Brooke's face; certain, immediate death. He shrugged, very slightly.

"I should dislike, exceedingly, to have my blood upon your hands," he sneered. He turned his back on Brooke and, followed alertly by the muzzle of his own weapon, crossed to where the two girls lay.

"Mrs. Gregory!" he said sharply. "You hear my voice; your recognize it. Answer me!"

Irene's throat twitched; her pendulous jaw clicked shut. Her

pale lips fluttered as she spoke: "I . . . I hear you," she whispered.

"Then listen. You will awake in thirty minutes exactly. You will remember nothing which has happened tonight. Nothing. Do you understand?"

"I will awaken in thirty minutes exactly. I will remember nothing which has happened tonight," she repeated dully. "I understand."

I shuddered. The dominance he held over the minds of these two helpless creatures was a terrifying thing. I glanced at Brooke as Colchester repeated the same formula, and received the same response from Anita. Brooke's face was utterly bloodless, and the hand which held the revolver was shaking.

"Get the women out, Tom, while I guard him," said Brooke. "Can you make it?"

"Of course!" I picked up Irene and carried her to the entrance of the passage, returning immediately, for Anita. Colchester followed me out, Brooke close on his heels.

"This way, Brooke," I called. "His boat's just a short distance down the shore. We'll go back in it—"

It was just at that instant, while Brooke's attention was directed on what I was saying, that Colchester whirled with lightning swiftness, and sent the gun spinning from Brooke's hand. It flashed in a brief arc and fell into the ocean, a dozen feet away.

"You fools!" gibed Colchester. "Did you really think you could do it? I'm free, and you—you dare not leave your precious women! If you do—" He laughed and laughing, started to run down the shore, both Brooke and I on his heels.

But Colchester was in better shape than either of us. Brooke's legs were cramped from being bound so long, and I was nearly done in. Given time, Brooke, at least, might have caught him. But there was not time—not if we loved the women there on the sand.

Thirty minutes, we had, and nearly ten were gone already.

(turn to page 119)

The Shadow On The Sky

By August Derleth

This year (1969 as this blurb is being typed), Arkham House is celebrating its 30th birthday; and had his work (with Donald Wandrei at the start, back in 1939) in the field of imaginative literature been nothing more than the founding and preservation of this publishing concern, the name of AUGUST DERLETH would still have a lasting place in the hearts of lovers of weird literature. It was his efforts which kept the memory of H. P. Lovecraft alive during the years after 1937 when HPL might otherwise have fallen into obscurity, and Derleth deserves a very large share of the credit for the expanded reputation that HPL is enjoying today.

To list his other accomplishments, however briefly, would take far more space than even a long blurb should occupy. I shall therefore be arbitrarily selective and say that, for me, his second most solid claim to immortality is the series of pastiches he wrote on the Sherlock Holmes stories – the Solar Pons/Dr. Parker series – which, without any attempt to imitate Dr. Watson's style, succeeds better than any other long-range efforts that I have seen. The existence of the Praed Street Irregulars is sufficient proof of the fact that Solar Pons has a considerable and discriminating following. All of us hope that Mr. Derleth will retain both the interest and the ability to bring us more of Dr. Parker's narratives.

His first story appeared in the May 1926 issue of *WEIRD TALES (Bat's Belfry)*, and while it was no masterpiece it was a good beginning, at the worst equal to numerous other stories that were seeing print there at the time—in fact, I'd say it was considerably better than a discouraging number of them. Estimates of how good his weird stories are vary; but having read nearly all of them in print, I can say that the best are very fine indeed, and that I have never found any of them, even the slightest, dull.

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illustration by Amos Sewell

SIR HILARY JAMES SAW the thing first at dusk, while returning from a stroll on the fens. He said, half aloud, "I am tired," and passed his hand over his eyes; but the thing did not vanish. Then he looked at the thing steadily for a moment, and decided at last that it was one of those inexplicable optical illusions, similar to a mirage, which have come to so many tired wanderers. And though he was not at all tired this evening in 1931, this explanation gave him a certain satisfaction, and his

vague uneasiness fell away from him. When he got home, he forgot about it entirely.

Then, in the middle of the night, Sir Hilary awoke in sudden, unaccountable terror. He felt that he was stifling, and threw back the covers. Then he got up and raised the window. At that moment, he saw the thing for the second time. There it was on the slate-gray sky—a great black shadow, fixed upon the gray and white of the clouds, the shadow of a gallows-tree, and a man hanging from it.

A gigantic thing it was, an utterly impossible thing, and he continued to watch it in fascination. It struck him suddenly that the thing rose out of the fens and up into the sky. But he knew there was nothing on the fens. Now he saw suddenly that there was a movement about the shadow, and as he watched, he saw that the man hanging was swinging gently to and fro in the sky. Then, abruptly, Sir Hilary reached up and pulled the shade across the window. A moment later, he turned up the light.

Sir Hilary James was not a model English gentleman. The countryside was rather soured on him, and he, while not an unpleasant gentleman, cared not a whit for the opinions of his neighbors. Most of them were simple country people, but there were not a few titles among them. Sir Hilary was himself a baronet of a rather obscure family. To the unfounded irritation of his titled neighbors, he refused to attend their social functions. To add to this, he strove noticeably to cut short their friendly calls, so that in time they stopped entirely. Nor did he ever return their visits. His general attitude was not conducive to intimacy, or even to a sort of vague friendliness. It was not that he was a disagreeable person, and his neighbors seemed somehow to realize this, but that for some reason their presence disturbed him.

He was unmarried, and lived in his house on the fringe of the fens with his four servants. The secret of his attempts at isolation was variously interpreted by his neighbors. There were some who thought of him as hiding from the law, and some who looked upon him as a man with some dark secret to cloak. It had never occurred to these simple people that there might at some time be

in the house near the fens a James who had no interest in them. As a matter of fact, Sir Hilary James was writing a book, a sort of history of his family, and, with some journalistic experience behind him, he realized that interruptions of any kind might be fatal to his end. He took his recreation in lonely walks over the fens and in short runs up to London.

James had almost completed the history of his line when the apparition came upon him. After the occurrence on the fens, he took no more strolls and after what he saw from the window, he avoided the windows at night. But he could not escape the thing as easily as that. It was very difficult to keep from looking out the windows, and the sky was very easy to see. Besides, the shadow had about it a disconcerting irregularity in its appearance. He was not long in discovering that the shadow had no stationary form, but seemed designed, rather, to catch his eye. The history of James' line was destined not to be finished soon, and Sir Hilary James realized that the shadow on the sky was the distracting influence. When the thing began to appear by day, he yielded to his better judgment and called in Sir Halstead Massingham, the famous nerve specialist and authority on psychic disorders arising from the nervous system.

Sir Halstead, somewhat of an austere individual and the owner of a nature similar in many respects to that of Sir Hilary James, found his patient on the verge of a nervous collapse—not so much for fear of the shadow as from an inner knowledge that he would not be able to complete his history, on which task he had set his heart and mind.

Sir Halstead, with the air of the specialist who is reasonably certain of what his first analysis will disclose, made a preliminary examination of his patient, together with a thorough inquiry into his daily habits. The examination disclosed scarcely anything abnormal, a discovery which so disconcerted Sir Halstead that he suggested to Sir Hilary the advisability of calling in a consultant. James readily consented. Consequently, Sir Halstead wired to London for Dr. Robin Davey, the alienist. Dr. Davey, in the midst of his rise to prestige, could not very well afford to

disregard Sir Halstead's request. He arrived within twelve hours after his receipt of Sir Halstead's wire.

Together, the two of them gave James a rather rigid and uncomfortable cross-examination. This brought them nothing more than Sir Halstead had already learned from his patient. The tale of the shadow on the sky was regarded somewhat skeptically. Sir Halstead had been unable to see the shadow the preceding night, and that night Dr. Davey was likewise disappointed.

James assiduously avoided the windows, though in the middle of the night he called out, and, when Sir Halstead came to him, told him that the shadow had been reflected in the mirror opposite the window, and that he had seen the man hanging, and that the man was laughing silently and horribly. He had called, yes. Could the shade be lowered? The immediate result of this incident was a consultation between the two psychiatrists. Sir Hilary James was regarded as suffering from a most peculiar illusion, brought on perhaps by his isolation, added to the intense mental stress of his studies. In the end it was thought best to suggest to James that he force himself to face the shadow and watch it carefully as long as he could stand up under the strain of the thing. After some persuasion, James submitted hesitantly and the following night was fixed upon for the experiment.

It was decided that James was to watch the fens from the window of his chamber; he was to sit and stare steadily at whatever seemed to appear, and with the specialists on either side of him, try to convince himself that the thing was an optical illusion. To this arrangement Sir Hilary agreed with less reluctance than he had shown when the plan was first proposed. Eight o'clock that evening found the three of them sitting at the window. James gazing earnestly out across the lowlands, and the doctors closely observing their patient. It was to be expected that nothing would occur for the first hour or two. After an early excitement, James became amazingly calm, and toward ten o'clock took to joking with the specialists.

He had taken his eyes from the fens for a moment, and was

looking at Sir Halstead when the thing came. When he turned again to look from the window, he stiffened perceptibly.

"It's there," he murmured.

Sir Halstead shot a quick glance at Dr. Davey; they nodded to each other, and began to watch their patient with redoubled vigilance.

"You will watch it carefully, and report every movement to us," said Sir Halstead in a low voice.

"Do not forget," put in Dr. Davey, "that it is in all possibility an optical illusion."

"But surely you can see it?" asked James in a distressed voice.

The specialists looked at each other again.

"It does seem—" began Dr. Davey, but Sir Halstead cut him short.

"There is nothing there!" he snapped.

"The man is swinging," said James, as if he had not heard.

Involuntarily Dr. Davey shot a quick glance out upon the lowlands, pale in the light of the full moon. There was nothing save a vast expanse of grass, and the sky was clear.

"He is swinging . . . faster and faster.."

Sir Halstead reached forward and opened the window; a refreshing breath of air entered the room.

"It seems he is coming closer . . . closer. He is!" Sir Hilary James involuntarily jerked himself backward. At once he felt the strong hands of Sir Halstead pushing him forward again; and he had a short flash of the psychiatrist's determined face.

"Go on," said Sir Halstead.

"He is very close now," said James jerkily. "I am horribly afraid of him."

Simultaneously both specialists reached out and touched him; Sir Hilary appeared reassured.

"He is laughing in a silent voice—Oh! this is ghastly. I cannot stand it much longer."

"Go on," repeated Sir Halstead inexorably.

"He is just outside the window now, swinging to and fro . . . like . . . like a pendulum." At this point James became strangely silent

"Watch him," persisted Sir Halstead "Watch him closely."

"He is waving his hands now . . ." Sir Hilary paused again, but presently he went on. "Now he is putting them up to his neck . . . and he is taking the rope from his neck. He is laughing. He is pointing at the looped rope in his hands . . . He seems to be beckoning to me." Sir Hilary leaned forward suddenly; then he gave vent to a horrified scream: "No—no! My God, the window . . . the window . . ."

Neither Sir Halstead nor Dr. Davey had any clear conception of exactly what happened then. Both agreed that with one accord they had risen to lower the window at James' frantic scream; then both of them had been felled to the floor by a blow. They thought that James had got up with them, and, in flinging out his arms violently, had felled them. They were not hurt, but when they got up to look about them, James had vanished utterly. The window was still open. Together the two of them ran to the window and looked out; but James was not below the window, as they had supposed he might be. There was no movement upon the fens, save the slowly undulating whiteness of the mists that were beginning to rise.

Then suddenly Dr. Davey looked up into the sky. He stumbled backwards and laid a trembling hand on Sir Halstead's arm. "My God, Massingham. There *is* something swinging in the moon—a man, I think."

Sir Halstead snorted and looked from the window up at the face of the moon. There was nothing there. "Nonsense," he snapped. "Seems to have got you, too. I think—"

But his sentence was never finished, for suddenly out of the night came two faint cries, one following close upon the other. They came from somewhere out over the fens, and they were unmistakably cries of "Help!" Then there was complete and awful silence.

For a moment the two men stood there; then Dr. Davey rushed from the room, Sir Halstead in his wake.

"Rouse the servants, Massingham," shouted Dr. Davey. "Hounds, too. I'm going to search every blessed inch of that bog land out there."

But Sir Halstead needed no urging. He had been struck by the same preposterous thought that had come to Dr. Davey.

Sir Halstead and the servants, most of them only half clothed, were out upon the fens before Dr. Davey appeared. There was no inclination to wait for the specialist, and Sir Halstead set out at once with the servants. Sir Halstead was soon outdistanced by the younger servants, but he could hear the dogs running aimlessly about ahead of him, whining softly, not quite certain of their quarry.

Sir Halstead had paused for breath, when Dr. Davey caught up with him. "Massingham," he jerked out, "look at this."

He had a flashlight and he turned this on the paper that fluttered in his hand. Sir Halstead saw that the paper was quite yellow with its age, but the writing was still clear. He read silently:

> "On Ye Knoll this year, 1727, hath Ye Lord of Furnival, Guy James, condemned and hanged one Hamish Inness, for poaching, who, dying, pronounced this curse upon ye line of Furnival: "Thy line shall pass in ye seventh generation, when I shall come unto him in this generation in his thirty-seventh year and hang him here upon this tree. This by Ye Branches of Ye Inverted Cross, by Ye arm of this Gallows-tree, and by Ye all-knowing Trinity."

"Where did you find this?" asked Sir Halstead, when he had finished.

"In the library. Right among all those papers he'd been using for his book." He took a deep breath. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Nothing. I don't want to think," snapped Sir Halstead.

"But, Massingham, the shadow on the sky—the gallows-tree—the man hanging—then this. And James is in his thirty-seventh year!"

Whatever Sir Halstead might have said was cut off by the sudden baying and howling of the dogs in the distance, at a point

to which the bobbing lanterns of the searchers were slowly converging.

"They've found him," shouted Dr. Davey, and he was off. Sir Halstead was not far behind.

Their passage over the fens was necessarily slow, but after some minutes, the men got there. Sir Hilary James was lying face downward in the long grass on a small knoll that rose out of the marshy land.

"Has anyone touched him?" asked Sir Halstead.

There was an unanimous shaking of heads.

"Who found him?"

"The hounds, sir. They made for Gallows Point right off."

There was a sharp exclamation from Dr. Davey, and a muttered repetition, "Gallows Point!"

Sir Halstead affected not to notice, and went on. "Dogs strike a trail?"

"No; the wind, sir. Seems there was no trail, sir."

Sir Halstead nodded and bent to examine the body. He looked up after a second, his face yellow in the lantern light. "Heart failure," he said dully. "Someone go for a stretcher."

"Already gone, sir," said one of the servants.

"Very well; we'll wait here. No one touch him, please."

"Dead, is 'e, sir?" came a quavering voice from the small knot of servants.

Sir Halstead nodded.

When the improvised stretcher came, Sir Halstead and Dr. Davey carefully arranged the body of Sir Hilary on it. Then the servants took it up and went ahead; the two specialists walked a short distance behind.

"What are we to do?" asked Dr. Davey.

Sir Halstead took a deep breath. "This is the very first time that I am glad of my prestige, and yours, Davey. We must do all in our power to prevent an examination of the body. We shall have to call in the necessary officials, but I am sure they will take our statements at face value. Sir Hilary James ran out upon the fens during treatment for his heart. Here his heart gave out. That

must be the substance of our statement. Under no conditions must we allow anyone to see his neck."

"His neck!" exclaimed Dr. Davey in surprise.

Sir Halstead grasped his companion's wrist in a vise-like grip. "Be more discreet, Doctor. Mr James' neck is broken, and there is a mark there. *The man has been hanged!"*

The Reckoning

Starting with our next issue, this department will contain a summary and report of your consensus upon the contents of earlier issues. I cannot guarantee that *The Reckoning* will appear in each and every issue; too much depends upon circumstances entirely beyond and outside of the Editor's control. However, whenever an issue is closed *and* there is both sufficient space and an adequate number of ballots from you, the active readers, we will publish your findings on the earliest former issue not yet reported upon.

For the benefit of those who are not already aware of how we score your ballots, whether they be Preference Pages, postcards, letters, etc., or whether you have actually listed the stories as suggested on page 130 we score any ballot wherein we can deduce your order of preference at all. The system suggestion on page 130 makes it simplest for us; that is the reason for it.

With our scoring system, the ideal story would be one that every active reader rated "0", outstanding. It would thus come out with a perfect score: 0. There are five stories in this issue, so if you find one (or more) outstanding then the story you liked best after this (or these) should be rated "1". That is how we would score it, anyway. If, alas, you actively disliked a story, rather than just considering it in last place, and scored it "X", then we would score it 6 an "X" on our score sheet is marked in red and even if you found all the other stories outstanding, it would still count for the entire six points, one point being a penalty point. Stories not scored at all on your ballots have to be given one point more than the highest number already on your ballot unless we do that, then such a story would count the same way as an outstanding or zero vote. I realize that this is imperfect, but after many years of experimentation with scoring systems, this seems to work out as most nearly satisfactory. I do not say "best" or "better" because I don't really consider any system I've encountered to be really good, when used with the rather small number of votes we actually receive, in relation to the actual number of readers of each issue.

Can this system be gimmicked by an author or group of readers? Yes – it can; but not as easily as you might think, and the odds are that any such attempt would reveal itself rather soon.

The Laundromat

by Dick Donley

Our new author gives a different twist on the old saying, "There's no such thing as a free lunch."

IN THE EVENINGS fog moved in off the water and swirled down Delaney Avenue; and it was in the evenings that Morgan took his clothes to the laundromat–three blocks up Delaney from his apartment.

Directly across from the apartment was a house, weatherbeaten by the lake winds, waterlogged by a half century of damp air. Nobody should live there, but somebody did, light always showing behind tattered window shades. Also, in that first block was a bar; light there, too, spilling out through partly open door. Morgan saw no one entering or leaving, but inside were the muted sounds of voices, pulsing music, and the ring of glasses.

Then, a potholed street to cross, and a vacant lot full of great green weeds, and sour smell of stagnant water filling the scooped depression in the red clay. When the wind blew and the wind blew most of the time–paper of every conceivable type stacked up against the weeds. Headlines, Dick Tracy, aluminum foil, greasy sacks . . .

And next to the lot was a filling station with hub caps nailed along one wall; two ancient pumps with coiled hoses; and the constant sound of revving motors. Scooters, motorcycles, strange low cars with bones and guts exposed, and snarling, smoking, wrench wielding youths hovering over them.

Another crossing, and a beauty salon with artificial stone front and inside, women with heads enclosed by hive like driers. Around them fluttered girls in white; short-skirted, with bony legs and high hairdoes, mascaraed eyes and pale lipstick. And in that same third block was the laundromat.

Morgan would turn in here, bag full of underclothes, socks, wrinkled handkerchiefs in hand, push open the door—then nod toward the man and woman seated near the large drier at the end of the room. They never nodded back; but, once committed to nodding himself, Morgan felt obliged to keep it up regardless of their lack of courtesy.

A narrow aisle separated the row of identical automatic washers on one side, driers on the other. Morgan would patiently feed his soiled garments into the mouth of one of the washers, close the door, slip in his coin and perch uncomfortably on a soap stained stool while the clothes whirled through the cycles. Thirty minutes. Then, remove the sodden things, place them in a drier across the aisle, another coin—this cycle lasted forty minutes. An hour and ten minute ritual. Twice a week. Occasionally three times. Finished; another nod to the silent couple by the large drier and back the three blocks. Salon, filling station, vacant lot, bar, house, apartment . . .

Varying the routine by taking the opposite, north side of the street had occurred to him; been rejected. His apartment, after all, was on *this* side. Also, truthful with himself as always, he had the nagging suspicion that once he crossed over, penetrated the fogginess of Delaney Avenue, he might find only the mirror image of the south side: salon, filling station . . .

Eventually he would move of course. Across town, or up town. Maybe out of town, because this job was not such a good one after all. It was no better and no worse than any other job in

any town he had ever known. Sameness. And not even a nod from the couple who ran the laundromat.

One Saturday, he wandered east down Delaney instead of west and found the town park. But the leaves had left the trees, and the place was shrouded with the constant fog. A truck was picking up the few remaining benches scattered here and there along the cracked and crumbled walk which wandered across sparse grass. The park offered nothing.

He turned back to the apartment, and his landlady passed him as he entered the front door. "Good ..." but even as he commenced the greeting, she walked on without a sound and slammed into her own room down the hall.

Hardly enough laundry to justify the trip, but he sacked up the few clothes anyhow, and made the three block trip. Three blocks of silence. He was almost a part of the fog. A woman's figure materialized out of the mist, standing on the porch of the house, staring through him as he passed. He raised a hand, but received nothing in the way of a greeting in return. And if there was even a lull in the grunting, clanging conversation of the longhaired group at the gas station, he was unaware of it.

The beauty shop was closed for the evening, venetian blinds partly open and showing stark and spare against the few flourescent bulbs still burning inside. He entered the laundromat, and the couple at the rear looked up as he entered, then turned back to each other. I won't nod, he told himself, but reflex action betrayed him, and he did. They nodded back! Astonished, he let the bag fall to the floor. The old man was actually smiling. Morgan shook his head. Strange ...

He moved to the closest washer, but it was in use. And the one next to it, and the next one. They were all spinning. And no one but the old couple in the place—

"Busy Saturday!" The unfamiliar voice boomed through the laundromat like an echo in a canyon, and Morgan jumped. Other than terse business language at the office, he heard practically nothing addressed to him.

"Busy." The old man came toward him down the water marked floor, chewing a toothpick. "About dinner time. Maybe

you'd like to go across the street and grab a bite?" The toothpick danced across his mouth. "I'll shove your duds in the first one comes open. Order a steak over there maybe. And plenty potatoes. Thin little fellow like you ought to eat up . . ." The proprieter chuckled, and down by the drier his wife nodded and laughed softly.

And hardly realizing what he was about, so awestruck by the unaccustomed attention and conversation, Morgan left the place, walked across the street as directed to a small corner restaurant that he hadn't known existed. It was a day of wonders, because here too he was greeted. Met at the door with a genial smile and a handclasp. *"Hola, amigo!"* Small, perspiring, apron around waist, huge chef's cap—the fellow acted delighted. "Sit down, sit down! The full course, *si*?" He pulled Morgan toward a chair. *"Guacamole, tacos,* then—ah, *si,* then the *enchiladas, frijoles, tortillas . . .*"

Stupified, Morgan let himself be seated, bibbed, wined, and fed. And fed. And fed some more. Finally, sated with the heavy richness and pepper heat of Mexican food, he belched into his thick linen napkin, and took one last lingering sip of beer. Contented as he had not been in—how long?

The little man in the tall hat came to him. "Finished? Ah, *senor . . .*" The bill! How much would it be? Frantically, he pulled his thin billfold from a hip pocket. One, two . . .

"How—how much?"

The other smiled and shrugged. "For you, *amigo,* who could care?"

"But . . ."

"Ah, well, then, say a few pesos. Perhaps— *si*— a half a dollar . . ." And then, as Morgan tinkled change in his pocket, he added, hat shaking, "Including tip."

Feeling ridiculously at peace with himself and the shabby town, Morgan walked back to the laundromat to be greeted warmly once again. "Yes, sir. Got them clothes here all ready to go. Still warm, even!" The old man squinted at Morgan. "Got a good meal, did you?"

The old fellow's eyes twinkled, and Morgan felt his lips stretch

into a semblance of a smile. "Yes—yes, I did. Funny—never realized that restaurant was there. Funny!"

The old man shrugged. "Hole in the wall. Not much business. Good chow, though, sometimes."

Chow? The word was an affront to the Mexican feast. "Yes . . ." Morgan, said, no better word coming to mind, and reached for his bag.

"You bet!" The old man thrust a toothpick back into his mouth and sauntered toward his silent wife who had watched the whole conversation intently. Morgan nodded, they nodded back, and he walked out into the night.

He dreamed of food. Great steaming platters of Mexican food, garnished with chili peppers, topped with pancake sized tortillas . . .

He managed until payday before visiting the restaurant again. This time not even on a washday. He pushed through the door, mouth watering, already running down the menu in his mind, feeling the silly grin pulling at his lips as the proprieter came up.

"Ah, *Herr* Morgan!"

He started, both at the unexpected sound of his name, and the accent. "I'm honored to have you as a guest again. Tonight? *Sauerbraten*, maybe? *Ach*, the *sauerbraten!* Or *bratwurst*— a big *bratwurst* sandwich? On *pumpernickel* with hot mustard . . . and a glass of *bach*?"

And the German dishes were every bit as good as the Mexican. He left, patting his stomach. Actually had to take out two notches in his belt. And only forty-five cents this time! Passing the laundromat, the old man and his wife waved at him and smiled. Both smiled! He waved back, and walked on through the mists of Delaney Avenue, savoring the memory of the meal.

The next visit, it was French *cuisine* with *crepes suzettes* and imported champagne. Three days later, it was *pizza*, and a great dish of *lasagna* with red wine.

Morgan began eating there every other night. Then every night. It was his restaurant. For at this early hour of the evening he always ate alone, with only the little chef standing by to tend to all his culinary needs. He noticed as he shaved one morning that

his face was beginning to fill out, frown wrinkles smoothing away. He bought a new pair of slacks, and was surprised to find that he was now a 36 waist. He couldn't remember when he hadn't been a 32. His shirt collar bit into his neck, and he knew he was also due for a larger size there.

The lady in the old house on the corner was waving to him now. Either from the porch or from a window—always a wave as he passed and what seemed a bolder look than necessary. Even the boys at the gas station would look up from their frantic labor, grin and yell, "Yo!" or "Hey!", and watch him as he passed.

Driers hid the eyes of the ladies in the beauty salon, but he sensed that they knew when he passed. And the eyes of the beauticians were frank and appraising from beneath their long eyelashes. Morgan caught himself straightening his shoulders, adjusting his coat lapels, tipping his hat back just a shade, as he approached their big window.

And finally, he had to buy a new suit. He could no longer zip the trousers of his old one, and had long since given up trying to button the coat. There was a weighing machine outside the door of the laundromat, and on a whim one evening he put in a penny and stepped on the scales. Unbelieving, he watched the long needle flutter around the 200 pounds mark. Incredible! Sixty pounds in only six weeks? He stepped off, shaking his head.

"Hard to believe," he told the old man inside. "Really . . ."

"Good chow," cackled the other. "Told you that place had good chow!" And he slapped playfully at Morgan's stomach.

Returning from work one late autumn evening, he slipped out of his coat and shirt and stood for a moment wondering idly, pleasantly, what the restaurant would feature this night. German food? Or French? No—tonight would be . . . he laughed to himself and rummaged in his closet for a clean shirt. Why speculate? He was always surprised, and the surprises were always delicious. His groping hand encountered no shirt. Frowning, he peered into the musty darkness of the closet. Funny—there should be at least one. He looked into the laundry hamper. Full!

But he'd just washed day before yesterday. Hadn't he? The days did have a habit of running together anyway, though . . .

Shrugging, he put on the soiled shirt again, and filled the laundry sack with clothes from the hamper. It would take only moments to drop them off before eating.

The fog on the street swirled around the trees and fences, trickled into the storm sewers. Morgan pulled his coat collar up. There were no lights in the house on the corner—none, either, in the bar. No signs of life at the gas station. He had always thought it ran twenty four hours a day. The beauty salon was shuttered and dark, and only the dim light from the shaded windows of the laundromat lit the street. Shivering, Morgan stepped into its welcome warmth. Stepped into light and hot damp air, and into the midst of all the people on Delaney Avenue!

His landlady, for heaven's sake! And the woman from the house on the corner, plump and perspiring, sitting on a stool by the window. And around the table in the rear were the boys from the filling station, playing some kind of a game with their knives, sticking them into the soft wooden floor. And men he didn't recognize, but they laughed as he looked around, and the laughs went with those he'd heard coming from the open door of the bar. Ladies were there with their hair in curlers. Strange faces, but he recognized fat knees and thick fingered hands with heavy rings. Girls in white uniforms with orange lips, tongues showing between crooked teeth. The owner and his wife . . .

"Evening, Mr. Morgan . . ."

He smiled, enjoying the sight of all these people together. "Good evening!" He dropped his clothes bag on the floor, looking for an empty washer.

"Ah, Mr. Morgan . . ." The chef from the restaurant stepped out from behind the big drier. His tall hat was perched on the back of his head. His face glistened with sweat. "Come down here where it's warm!"

Surprised to see the little man, Morgan moved down the narrow aisle, working his way between people. Happy, smiling people . . .

It *was* warm at the end of the room. And as he responded to

the smiles around him, Morgan realized suddenly that for the first time in his life, he belonged! He really did, and he said, "I'm—I'm happy to be here . . ."

The boys flipped their knives and grinned up at him, and the chef nodded, clapping his hands. "Yes, yes . . ."

The heat was yawn producing, and despite himself, his lips stretched, and he patted his mouth with the back of his hand. "Excuse me," he said. "The heat . . ."

"Of course," said the beaming chef, wiping perspiration from his head. "It is warm."

Morgan was opposite the mouth of the large drier. Hot elements blazed across its circumference, heat waves danced inside, across the large grill in the center, reflecting off the steel of the knife blades and the sparkling silverware on a huge table beside the drier a table set for many with salads, relishes, vegetables, bottles of wine, and bright ringed china. Only the immense platter in the center was empty.

He yawned again, feeling himself blush for having done it twice, and then smiled as the people of the street crowded close around him. It was almost like a surprise party, and he had never been to one of those in his life. Tears came to his eyes. "It's—It's like a surprise party," he said . . .

"It is indeed." The chef beamed from beneath his hat, and gestured to the boys with the knives.

The Man Who Never Came Back

by Pearl Norton Swet

PEARL NORTON SWET had two stories in *WEIRD TALES*, and one in WT's companion publication, *ORIENTAL STORIES*. I have not read the oriental tale, but both of the WT entries suggest that she was an established writer, who turned to this sort of composition occasionally, as did many of those whose names appear but once or twice in Wright's issues.

We walked, prosaically enough, in a city park zoo, Bannister and I. It was Autumn, 1931, golden, opulent. We were content in friendship, and London seemed a good and peaceful place. Passing the leopard cages, Bannister looked quickly away from the sleek and yawning cats and swore emphatically in a voice that shook with a surprizing emotion, "Damn their spotted hides! I hate the beasts! Come, let's get away from the sight of them."

"Why?" I asked curiously and somewhat surprized at this show of feeling in the suavely handsome Bannister. Bannister was, and is, the vice-president of the British West Coast Products Company; learned the business from the ground up, as the saying is. He was too valuable a man to waste in equatorial Africa. The company has him in London, where he has become a sedate husband and father, living in an equally sedate suburb.

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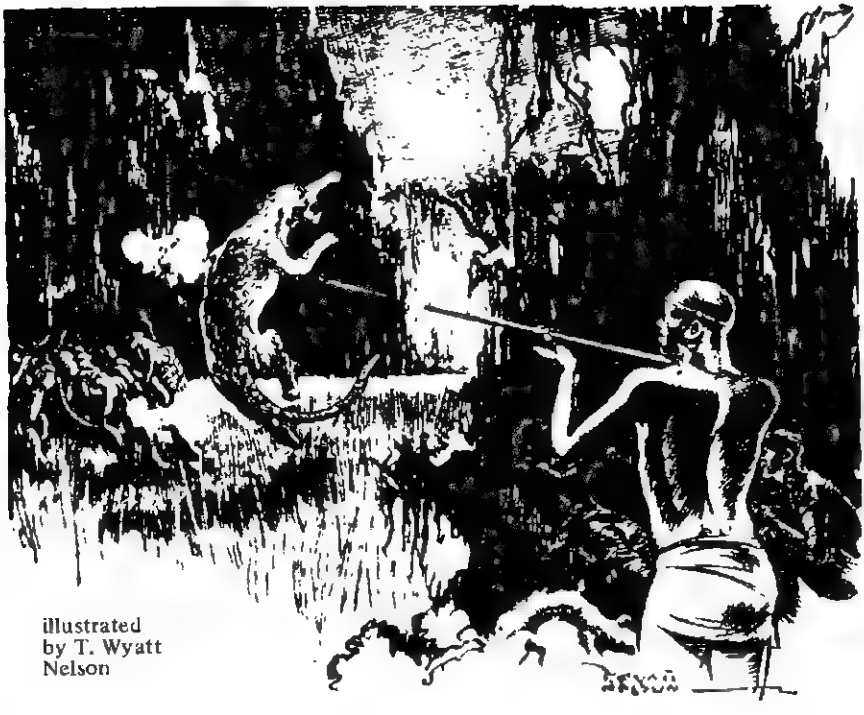

illustrated by T. Wyatt Nelson

What had *he* to do with leopards? So I asked again, "Why? What have you against leopards, anyway?"

We found a green bench far from the leopards' cages and Bannister told me, through that golden afternoon, the story of Herbie Tillson. Flirtatious nursemaids trundled their infant charges past our bench; a beggar stopped and whined for money; a gray squirrel, pertly curious and unafraid, came to squat beside us, hopeful of food.

These things went on about us, but while Bannister talked, I scarcely realized that we sat in a park with evidences of civilization thick about us. And there was sometimes sadness and sometimes bitterness in Bannister's voice as he told me about Herbie Tillson.

When Herbie Tillson arrived on a cargo-boat at Pambia on the West Coast of equatorial Africa, he looked exactly what he was—a colorless, little, twenty-four-year-old London clerk who had been seasick all the way out from England.

Herbie Tillson was in that region so aptly called the white man's graveyard, because, like a good many other clerks in musty London offices, he wanted a colorful and virile life. He happened to have some business connections that finally landed him in the five-room frame bungalow at Pambia that was the West Coast Products Company's stronghold on the Guinea coast. And he thought Pambia must be colorful and virile.

There were living-quarters and offices and two men besides Bannister—Vierling and the red-headed Irishman, O'Donnel. The three who greeted Herbie at Pambia had slightly different views about Pambia, having been there a bit longer than they cared to be.

And then along came Herbie Tillson with his deprecatory manner and pale blond appearance—Herbie Tillson who thought that Pambia on the West Coast of Africa would give him color and glamor to dress up his life of drabness. So Bannister and the two others thought perhaps they had better tell Herbie right away that there was no such thing as colorful glamor in Pambia.

They thought they had better tell him that there were, though, plenty of dirty, sneaking Bendjabis, so steeped in superstition as to be afraid of their own shadows; that Pambia had tremendous, deluging rains that later, under terrific sun, made the land steam and give off a nauseating odor of decay. They would have liked to tell Herbie Tillson that the relentless ocean that was the foreground of this picture could, on an unusually hot day, take on a brassy look that made men dizzy and that the background of the Great Swabi forest harbored fearful beasts and still more fearful men in the eternal twilight of its swollen jungle.

But not one of the three could find it in his heart to tell Herbie any of these things. They reasoned that he'd learn it soon enough. The West Coast Products Company paid well, but there always came a time in the life of every Englishman who had ever come to Pambia, when he would quite willingly have given an

arm or a leg or even an eye for the opportunity of whiffing the damp, cool air of a London street, say on an autumn evening with the lights of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* glimmering down Fleet Street and the busses trundling by and the electric signs flashing.

That was the state to which they all had been reduced after a year or so in Pambia, that lay along a little river bank against which the jungle pushed. Bannister and Vierling and O'Donnel could see no reason why Herbie Tillson wouldn't, in time, be drooling about the lovely limejuice signs in Picadilly and yearning for a sight of the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street.

Herbie Tillson put on a pair of hornrimmed spectacles and went to work with an apparent zest that made the other three stick their tongues in their cheeks knowingly. They thought Herbie looked a good deal like a thin, serious insect in those big spectacles; razzed him a bit about them in a good-natured way.

"Well, you see, I have to wear glasses—in the daytime," explained Herbie. "In the dark I don't need 'em."

"D'ye mean to say you can see in the dark better than in the light?" asked O'Donnel.

"Just that," replied Herbie. "You know, my eyes are a bit queer."

He took off his spectacles and turned to O'Donnel, and it was then that O'Donnel noticed for the first time that the pupils of Herbie Tillson's eyes were not round. They were elliptical, narrowing to slits in the daylight and giving out a glint of phosphorescence that was all but dimmed at that afternoon hour.

"So" said Herbie, putting on his spectacles again, "you see I really need the glasses, funny as they are, if I am to see well in the daylight."

"But you can see well at night, eh?" persisted the Irishman, curiously.

"Oh quite." Herbie bent over his ledger, and as far as he was concerned the conversation was closed.

The three at Pambia had been so long without stimulus, comic or otherwise, that the coming of Herbie Tillson gave them something to talk about.

"I'm beginning to think the spalpean's a walkin' curiosity shop," said O'Donnel one morning, pausing in his work. "I got something to tell you, and since he's not here right now, I'll tell it."

He leaned forward in his chair toward Bannister's desk, and his face was comically mysterious. "The lad's not content with cat's eyes—he must have six toes on the foot of him—the left foot. I saw it with my own eyes when we swam two mornings ago."

As time went on and it became autumn, Pambia daily expected the rains and dragged to cover its few possessions. And at about that time Herbie Tillson began to take his solitary walks after dinner. He would leave the others playing a three-handed card game, or reading month-old copies of the *London Post*, and Herbie would go for a solitary walk, always toward the green, miasmic twilight that was the jungle.

They warned him. He smiled at them a shade pityingly. "Why, I have no fear of the jungle. I can't just explain, but I feel often that I should be very much at home in the jungle. But there's something–I don't know –no doubt you think me a bit dotty."

They assured him with admirable candor that they did think so. But he didn't mind. He took his walks just the same.

And then the rains came, and there were no more walks for Herbie Tillson. Instead, while the rain fell monotonously and drummed on the roof like a giant bumble-bee, Herbie spent his evenings hunched over books, which it soon became clear he wasn't reading.

When the Bendjabis, wet and miserable and coughing, came to beg quinine from Bannister, Herbie Tillson astonished them by trying to make friends. He persisted till a pot-bellied youth named Molu, but lately made house-boy at the bungalow, was won to a shy, animal-like friendship. One other, also, Herbie came to know—a black, lowering fellow, not of the Bendjabis, but said to come from the dread M'Banos who lived in the Great Swabi forest.

The M'Bano was in exile from his own people and tolerated by the Bendjabis only through fear and superstitious dread of a M'Bano's *gri-gri*, or spell. The sign language and jabberings of

Herbie and the M'Bano filled Vierling and O'Donnel with a comical disgust.

"What does he want to chum up with a dirty, black M'Bano for? Why doesn't he spend the wet season readin' *Punch* or improvin' his mind some way?"

But Bannister saw more than they. He thought he saw in Herbie Tillson a loneliness so infinite that mere civilized talk with his own kind could not satisfy it. He felt, in a strange, repelling flash of knowledge, that Herbie Tillson was not one of them; that his puny personality held something which would be difficult for them to understand. So Bannister did not ridicule Herbie, but he watched him silently, as Herbie drank in the tales that Molu and the black M'Bano so laboriously told him.

As soon as the rains were over and the land lay lushly green and panting under hot suns, Herbie began his jungle prowlings again. He went sometimes alone, and twice he went with the exiled M'Bano.

He was gone one night till after ten, so that the others were on the point of setting out to find him. But as they talked of it, Herbie returned. He came into the hall noiselessly out of the dark and stepped just inside the room where the others sat.

Herbie stood blinking at them, and they noted that he was not wearing his spectacles. His clothes were soiled with soft earth; his fair hair was wildly tousled. He was breathing hard, his mouth slightly opened, showing his strong, white teeth.

"Heavens, man! Where have you been?" They all three rose from their chairs and stared at Herbie.

For answer he turned those strange eyes of his full upon them in a sort of unseeing glare and brushed his chin sidewise in a queer manner against his left shoulder. His teeth bared themselves still more in something that was not quite a laugh and not quite a snarl. And abruptly turning, he re-entered the little hall and strode into his room, slamming the door.

"Whew!" exclaimed O'Donnel.

"Just that," said Vierling and raised his eyebrows. "You don't think our little Herbie has been drinking from the Bendjabi gourds?"

"No," said Bannister, shortly. "No. It's not drink. I—I've seen something like this once before. What a damned country this West Coast is, anyway!"

The other two were reticent for once; seemed to sense that Bannister would tolerate no curious questions. He stood at the door, looking into the hallway, and then he said without turning, "Don't say anything to Herbie, will you? I think it best not to speak of it. Good-night."

Bannister's room was next to Herbie's, and before he entered his own room, Bannister paused a second, as if listening. Then he went into his own room and softly closed the door.

Herbie Tillson was up early the next morning and in the office long before the others had begun work. He had not come in for breakfast. Bannister entered the office quietly and went up to Herbie as he stood before a large calendar on the wall. With a thick blue pencil Herbie was marking a circle about a date.

He did not notice Bannister, till Bannister laid a hand on his thin shoulder. "Sorry you don't feel so good, old fellow. Better go in now and let Molu bring you a bite of breakfast."

But Herbie shook his head. "No thanks. I'm quite all right." It was apparent that he wanted to be let alone.

Bannister's sharp eyes found opportunity to glance at the marked date on the big calendar. It was the twenty-fourth, the date of the full moon. When Bannister saw that, he looked at Herbie very hard and shut his mouth tightly to a thin line. For Bannister had been in the West Coast country for some time, and he knew a thing or two about it. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

Things went along in a sort of strained way at the offices of the West Coast Products Company, what with Herbie going about like a half-sick, little shadow and Bannister watching him with eyes that seemed to brood.

Vierling and O'Donnel were inclined to think that the long, dreary season of rains had brought an acute melancholy to Herbie Tillson. They knew, well enough, that was the usual reaction of the Britisher to Pambia's rains.

One evening they said as much to Bannister. It was terribly,

suffocatingly hot. The day had been a trying one; the evening was buzzing with myriad insects. The three men sat indoors behind the protecting screens and smoked and talked, while each wondered how Herbie Tillson could endure the pest-ridden heat and stench of a jungle night.

For Herbie had disappeared, soon after dinner, hatless, shirtless, as nonchalant as if bound for a walk in Hyde Park. He had gone straight across the river ford and at the steamy edge of greenness on the other side, Vierling had thought Herbie was joined by the M'Bano. He was not sure, but a shadow had stood at the water's edge and Herbie had joined it and had gone on with it.

"That black devil of a M'Bano has been hanging around here too much lately," said O'Donnel. "Pretends he needs medicines, but he's strong as an ox. D'ye know, some say his father was a leopardman in the Swabi? Anyway the M'Banos are all rotten. Herbie's a fool to listen to his yarns."

"Yes. And he and Molu always jabbering—all that witch-doctor stuff. Herbie dotes on it. I think the rains have made him dotty." Vierling looked at Bannister, questioningly. "Don't you thank so?"

"No, the wet season has nothing to do with the way Herbie's acting," said Bannister, a bit diffidently, as if he hated to talk about Herbie. "But—well, it's a case of the usual Swabi forest stuff—damnable place it is."

"Oh, sure," replied O'Donnel. "That rot they tell you would drive anybody out of his head. Herbie ought to have more sense than—"

At that moment they heard some one come into the hall. Soft footsteps, then a shuffling noise, and outside the door heavy, rasping breathing. Then louder footsteps past their door and the slam of Herbie's door followed by the grate of the lock.

The three men sat absolutely silent. Then Bannister got up and went outside. They heard him exclaim under his breath, and then he came back to the room and motioned for them to join him.

On the vine-shadowed veranda, Bannister turned his flashlight downward.

"Look," he said, in a low tone, and they saw dark tracks clearly marked on the dry boards. They were wet tracks, streaked with soft earth. A leaf lay near the door, no doubt brought in with the freshly made tracks.

O'Donnel bent over the imprints on the veranda. He straightened suddenly as if struck, and as he always did in excitement, lapsed into the phrases of his religion.

"Mother Mary and the saints preserve us! It's—it's leopard spoors!"

"They're here—and here—and here," said Bannister, still in that guarded tone. "They go from the veranda into the hall. That fool Molu left this screen-door ajar tonight. And, look," he stooped to pick up the leaf that lay on the floor. "This is a leaf from a baobab tree . . .The baobab tree grows only far in the jungle, in leopard country."

He motioned silently and they followed him into the hall. The flashlight showed plainly the progress of a leopard's padded feet to about the middle of the hall. At that point there was a blur of damp earth stains, and from there on to Herbie Tillson's door the board floor showed the print of a man's wet and muddy shoes—small, neatly fashioned shoes—Herbie Tillson's shoes.

O'Donnel was looking very wild, indeed, as the three went back to the room where they had sat while Herbie went down the hall to his room.

"You can't mean that the beast ran him right here into the middle of his own hall?" he stuttered, lighting a cigarette.

"No, I don't think anything of the sort," replied Bannister, calmly. "After all I know of this West Coast country and all I know of the Swabi forest and those devilish M'Banos, what I'm thinking can be expressed in one word . . .You probably know what I mean, both of you."

Almost under his breath Vierling said the word, said it fearfully, unbelievingly.

"Lycanthropy! . . . You mean to say it *can* happen? Men *can* change into—into animal form? Surely, Bannister, you're wrought up; you're just a bundle of nerves over this thing. You can't believe any such rot."

"Run along!" scoffed O'Donnel, "Leave that to the natives. Perhaps a dirty M'Bano could change his black body into a beast—but Herbie Tillson is an Englishman, even if he is a deuced queer one."

And Vierling had more to say. "Come now, old fellow. Don't be silly. You're giving us a bit of Africanized Kipling, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," Bannister almost snapped at him. "Mr. Kipling never dreamed of anything as horrible as these leopard-men out in the Swabi. I've been in this hold three years. It's an evil place, I tell you. There *are* leopard-men out there in the Swabi, and the M'Banos swear that their leaders are humans turned beast by a devilish alchemy which only one man in a thousand may possess."

He strode to the window and raised the blind to the top. He faced the others seriously. "Out there on that vine-shaded veranda we didn't notice, but, you see—it's the full of the moon . . . leopard time and the only time this hideous thing can take place, fully, completely, so that the man is lost and only the beast remains. Believe me, I'm older at this West Coast game than you are . . . *I know.*"

"I wonder," said Vierling, slowly. "I wonder just why Herbie Tillson came out here,"

"Because he couldn't help himself, Vierling. He came out here to this hell because he *had* to come—it was in his soul." Bannister paused a second and then said, softly, "He has the eyes of a cat."

"Cats! Leopards! You make me positively sick," said O'Donnel, with a wry face.

Bannister rubbed his forehead with his left plam and looked all at once very tired. "You know, I've had this thing on my mind, night and day, ever since I saw Herbie marking the calendar at the date of the full moon. And—when he turned about and looked at me that morning, I'm sure his eyes had changed and were the eyes of a leopard —not cat's eyes, but leopard eyes."

"Next boat is the *Astoria* with Captain Hines in command," said Vierling. Vierling was a very good man at the West Coast

Products Company. He knew his work. A bit stolid, perhaps, but all the better for that particular place and job.

"All right," Bannister said, thoughtfully. "When the *Astoria* sails from Pambia, Herbie Tillson will be on board."

"We'll shanghai the young fool," said O'Donnel, emphatically.

"Well, Herbie Tillson will be on board," repeated Bannister. And later Bannister was to remember those words and feel a sadness over them.

If Vierling and O'Donnel had been still skeptical of Bannister's wild surmises, they admitted the next morning that something sinister was at work about Pambia.

The young wife of the house-boy, Molu, was found dead, horribly mutilated, at the river's edge. Molu admitted that she had gone to the edge of the green forest to fetch water. She had gone there at night, too, and ordinarily no one would have thought of venturing near the edge of that noisome place, that had, so the natives claimed, an odor of death at the full of the moon.

But the young wife of Molu had laughed and had ventured to go for water, because the white brilliance of the moon made things light as day and she had thought to fill her jug and return quickly. But she had not returned. The jug of trickling water lay overturned beside her torn body when they found her.

Examining the small dark body the next morning, Bannister said to O'Donnel. "As I thought. The carotid artery is severed. It's a leopard killing."

The whimpering Molu stood near by. He caught at the English words which he understood, and he ceased his whimpering. He straightened, stood tense and listening for a moment, his eyes straining and focussed on the damp, green jungle across the little river. Molu raised one arm high and sailed his necklace of leopard teeth—teeth of his enemy—as far as it would go across the water toward the jungle. It was his gesture of vengeance. Then he turned and went back to his work in the bungalow.

When Bannister and men went back to their work that morning, there was no Herbie perched on his high stool checking cargo-lists.

"He wasn't in to breakfast, was he?" Bannister asked the question quite mechanically. They knew Herbie hadn't been in to breakfast. They hadn't seen him since six o'clock of the evening before.

As one man, the three went down the hall toward Herbie's door and Bannister rapped. There was no response, and so they opened the door and entered.

The bare little room was in prim order. On a wall hung a picture cut from a magazine—a picture of the English royal family. On a table beside the bed was a book and a cheap easel photograph of a girl. Bannister picked it up and looked at it a long time. The girl was calm-eyed, smooth-haired, and across the picture's base was scrawled, "Lovingly, Rosemary."

"Fancy him with a girl named Rosemary," murmured O'Donnel. "And he never once told us about her."

And then O'Donnel looked at the book's title. It was *The Days of Ancient Rome*. He laid it down and shook his head. "You must be all wrong, Bannister. Herbie's not—not a case for a witchdoctor."

But Bannister, standing beside the bed which had not been slept in, was gazing out of Herbie's window. The window faced the river and the forest and Bannister seemed to be trying to see far into its steamy greenness.

A feeling of oppression lay over the three men as they tried to go on with their work that day—an oppression amounting almost to a physical weight which bore down upon them in waves of vertigo.

Twenty-four hours later Herbie Tillson had not returned, and Bannister said after dinner, "This can't go on. We'll all be dotty in no time at all. What's the matter with us, anyway? Are *we* afraid of the Swabi, too? Let's go—now—while there is bright moonlight to help us— let's go and find Herbie Tillson."

"We'll go, of course," they told him. And Vierling said, "Better leave a letter here—explaining where we've gone—in case—"

"Yes—in case," said Bannister, grimly. They took rifles and sharp knives. The knives would help them cut through the tangle

of vegetation, and no white man goes without a rifle in the West Coast country.

They put certain drugs and lotions in their kit, with food and drink. And the three set out across the river, under a brilliant moon, to look for Herbie Tillson in the Great Swabi. As they prepared to go, they were thinking of Herbie Tillson as a little London clerk who had come to know the jungle too well. They did not think of him as a monster, a biological freak, a creature of horror. They were remembering the picture of the royal family which Herbie had put upon his wall. They were remembering the girl named Rosemary, and all the decent things that Herbie Tillson stood for came to his aid in their thoughts of him.

They went in darkness some of the time, a darkness that was damply pungent and swarming with insects, shut in by the curtain of the forest. And part of the time they cut their path through jungle ways that were fretted with moonlight.

After an hour's going they came to the edge of a moonlit clearing where the lush grass was bent low. The place was still, and there lay over it a smell, as of hot animal bodies—the smell of the jungle.

The staring moon blazed down on them in such a mad, white fury of light that Bannister fleetingly and irrelevantly wondered why the western world thought moonlight romantically lovely. There was nothing lovely and nothing romantic about this moonlight in the odorous jungle. This moonlight did not move men to amorous thoughts; rather it chilled their marrows in the way that any insane thing might do.

"Well, it's been a long pull and we've seen nothing but a lot of bugs," said Vierling, mopping his brow under the mesh of protecting netting.

"And are we to stop here for long? I don't like the looks—nor the smell—of this particular spot." O'Donnel was a bit peevish.

Bannister spoke in a low voice. "Keep quiet. That's leopard smell. I know it. Come, but don't speak."

He motioned and they followed him to a tall clump of bushes and at his direction huddled down behind them.

It seemed an hour that they lay uncomfortably hunched behind the bushes, fearful of reptiles when the grass behind them rustled; dreading the animal eyes that must stare at them from hidden places. Yet it was but a few moments actually, before there came to their straining ears the sound of a stealthy approach from the jungle across the clearing.

A baobab tree cast deep shadow on a strip of flattened, wiry grass and across this shadow there slowly moved into their vision a grotesquely inhuman group.

Men? Leopards? They were both—the terror-inspiring leopard-men of which the Bendjabis and the exiled M'Bano had told Herbie Tillson so many tales of horror. The creatures groveled, bellies to the grass. They went on all fours with a rippling leopard gait. They snarled among themselves. Subhuman, revolting, the lowest thing in the horror-ridden country of the jungle.

The three men in the shadows felt a dizzy nausea as they watched breathlessly. As the pack milled about, beating the long grass still flatter to the ground, there came a sudden, throaty snarl and into the clearing glided a huge leopard, flat head thrust forward, eyes gleaming, fangs showing. His powerful tail lashed slowly back and forth as he surveyed the groveling leopard-men who lay whimpering, bellies to the ground.

The leopard lifted its tawny head and gave out the eerie, blood-thirsty cry of the hunting-leopard. The leopard-men, in their hideous obsession, threw back their heads to answer, but on the cry of the king-leopard there came a resounding shot from behind the very bushes where Bannister and his men lay hidden.

Three things happened then, at the same time. The leopard-men ran screaming shrilly from the clearing, leaping and tearing at one another in their haste, as they disappeared into the jungle. The king-leopard leaped high into the air, spun about twitching and lashing his tail, then fell heavily to the ground, where he lay sprawled and still. At the same time, directly behind Bannister, there sprang a lithe, black figure, brandishing a rifle.

It was Molu. He bent over the dead leopard and pointed to a crimson hole behind the left ear.

"Him gone now. No more catch wife of Bendjabi." His voice was triumphant; his white teeth shone in a smile of satisfied revenge.

Bannister spoke to him sternly. "You followed us, Molu, to kill the leopard?"

"Oh, yes. I kill him," repeated Molu, only half understanding in his excitement. He peered at Bannister sidewise in a cunning, intent way. "Him no leopard for sure; *him man*, him lead leopard-men."

"My God! What is he saying?" exclaimed Vierling.

"You heard him," said Bannister, quietly. "Let me talk with him."

To Molu he said, "You're talking crazy, Molu. Your talk—no good. You don't know."

"Yes, I know," was Molu's stubborn reply. "I show you." He bent and lifted the left foot of the leopard and with a black finger he counted the toes of the animal. "One-two-three-four-five-six." Molu had been taught to count soon after he had come to the bungalow to work, and he was very proud of the accomplishment. He counted the leopard's toes again.

Dropping the heavy foot, he said, as though closing the incident: "You see. Him white man—from Pambia—white man with six toes, too. Molu give him breakfast one time and he wear no shoes. I *know*."

The childish mind of the black man had brought horror to the three who listened to his explanation. It *was* childish, they tried to reason. It *was* an impossible and hideous thing Molu was telling them.

"My God, let's go—let's get away from this place," cried O'Donnel, with a long, shuddering breath. He crossed himself, muttering a prayer.

"Yes," said Vierling. "Let's get out of this cursed forest."

"Leopard-men come, take him away all right," said Molu with cheerful nonchalance, indicating the sprawled beast.

Bannister could not find words that he could speak. His thoughts were formless ones; chaotic; vague. He felt, too, a

growing desire to hurry back to Pambia and see—he scarcely admitted to himself what he expected to see.

So with Molu trotting along beside them, they went back in a silence that was heavy with dread throughts. They hurried, stumbling, breathing hard through the odorous jungle, fighting swarms of insects.

And they came to Pambia across the river at an hour when the mad moon's brilliance was at its height, the sands, the sea, the buildings of the West Coast Products Company all white and shining in its unreal light.

They bade Molu to keep silence and they all went into the hall of the bungalow and stood at Herbie Tillson's door.

Bannister was the one who quietly opened the door and looked into the little room. He put a hand to his eyes, then, in a dizzy way, as he spoke.

"It is as Molu said and—Herbie has come back."

Very quietly with throats that contracted painfully and with

(Turn To Page 114)

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THE WEB OF LIVING DEATH

by Seabury Quinn

The fan magazine of the period, *FANTASY MAGAZINE*, reported in late 1934 that Seabury Quinn had sold *The Web of Living Death* to *WEIRD TALES*, and that this would be the first of a new series, to contrast with the truly weird cases of Jules De Grandin -although a sizeable percentage of de Grandin's 93 published cases have entirely "natural" explanations. There was the further impression that this would be another attempt to compete with such publications as Popular's *TERROR TALES* and *HORROR STORIES* which specialized in bizarre mysteries rooted in sadism and filled with torture scenes. One hears the expression "sex and sadism" relating to these publications, but the fact is that there was less sex in them than in the other magazines; the illustrations featured girls as naked, or as nearly naked, as they could be presented in those days, but the only purpose in tearing their clothes off was to torture or mutilate them—not at all a "sexy" proposition so far as the reasonably healthy erotic-minded reader was concerned. *The Web of Living Death* was voted "best in the issue" by the readers, but it was very mild by comparison with the orgies of blood in the co ıpetition; on the other hand, it was far more interesting in its background. However, no further stories in the series appeared; and it is possible, of course, that the editors of *FANTASY MAGAZINE* had been misinformed, or had obtained misimpressions about this being intended as a series.

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illustration by
Vincent Napoli

"I WOULDN'T TAKE THE SHORE ROAD tonight, sir." The filling-station attendant screwed the radiator cap in place and paused, one foot on the car step, a half-serious, half-stubborn look upon his honest, freckled face. "It's five miles longer by the inside way, but—"

"What's the matter, paving up?" asked Merrill as he tamped an ounce of tobacco into his pipe bowl. "There's nothing in the guide to indicate—"

"No, sir, nothing's wrong with the paving," the other admitted. "It's an all right road to drive on in the daytime,

but—well, sir, you can go that way if you want to, of course, but I wouldn't drive across them marshes after dark for sumpin pretty."

"I guess I'll take a chance," said Merrill, setting his pipe alight and shooting his self-starter. "Be seeing you."

A gibbous moon rode high in a sea of mackerel clouds, that night in 1933, and from the marshes, slashed and crisscrossed with tidal creeks, a steadily thickening bank of low-lying, miasmic mist marched shoreward. "H'm, maybe that young 'un knew what he was talking about, after all," Merrill murmured to himself, throttling down his engine. "It'll be thicker than pea soup in half an hour, not so good for speed—"

"Going my way, brother?" The questioner loomed beside the road amid the gathering mists, feet wide apart, thumb cocked in the familiar gesture of the hitch-hiker. A broad and most ingratiating grin was on his face.

"Er, yes, I suppose so," Merrill answered, surveying the other between narrowed lids. "Hop in."

"Thanks, I will," the young man answered laconically, clambering nimbly into the seat without troubling to open the roadster's door. Then, as Merrill put on speed: "Take it slow along here; I tried to do a Barney Oldfield half an hour ago. My puddle-jumper's mired hub-deep back there."

"Umph?" Merrill cast a sidelong, appraising glance at his companion as he eased the flow of gas. He was a very big young man, easily six feet in height, and broad proportionately. His face was deeply tanned, his blue eyes set amid a web of fine sun-wrinkles, his corduroy suit and high laced boots liberally overlaid with swamp-ooze.

"I tried to dig her out myself," he explained with a deprecating glance at his muddied clothes, "but it was no go. I'll send back a wrecking-car tomorrow morning if—" he paused reflectively, surveying the fog-shrouded scenery.

"Yes, if—" Merrill prompted sharply. "If we ever get any place," the other answered with a cheerful grin. "This stretch of road's not exactly what you'd call a health resort and—hold hard, man; down brakes!"

Looming through the swirling mist, not fifty feet away, the headlights of another car bore down on them.

Merrill wrenched his wheel abruptly, swinging his car violently to the right; the opposing headlights swerved left and came directly at him. Instinctively he bore his foot down on the brake, stopping with a grinding squeal, and as he halted, the headlights which confronted him abruptly disappeared, leaving him gazing up a long, deserted stretch of road, nothing visible for miles but the tall, brown grasses of the salt marshes, the ever-moving banks of fog, and the great tree which stood alone and sentinel-like beside the roadway where the other car had been.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle; I sure will!" his passenger declared. "You saw it, too, didn't you?"

"Saw it? Of course I did!'. Merrill answered tartly. "What—"

"Well, then, if I'm cuckoo, so are you. We'll be company for each other in the padded cell," the big young man grinned at him as he swung a leg over the side of the car.

"Where are you going?" Merrill asked, his scalp and neck still tingling with uncanny thrills.

"Just to do a little snooping. Motor cars don't jump out at you like the bogy man, then do a disappearing act, you know. Come on, want to have a look?"

"I—yes, of course," said Merrill, drawing up his knees as he wormed past the steering-wheel. "Be with you in a—"

He saw his guest stride quickly toward the tree, saw him thrust a hand beneath the skirt of his long jacket, heard his sudden shouted "Look out!" then saw no more as a blight of Stygian darkness fell upon him, smothering back the startled breath that rushed into his throat, and the cloyingly sweet scent of heavy fumes assailed his nostrils.

FAR AWAY, A HUNDRED MILLION MILES away, it seemed, a bright star winked at Merrill. It grew and widened, like the headlight of a locomotive rushing down the track, ceased flickering, became the steady glow of a big lamp. Merrill raised himself and looked about him. He lay upon a sort of ottoman covered with red cloth, and everywhere he looked the ruddy

color was repeated. The room was big, some forty feet in length by twenty broad, its walls hung with crimson brocade, its tiled floor covered with a crimson carpet. About the walls, set shoulder-high, and reminding Merrill of a sacrilegious parody of the stations of the cross set in a church, were little niches, each some eighteen inches wide by two feet high, framed and lined with polished ebony. Each niche contained a statuette wrought in gleaming marble. Each differed from the others, yet all had one thing in common: not one revealed a face. Some countenances were hidden by long, disheveled hair, some obscured by masks or the raised beavers of mediaeval helmets; one female statue wore a veil, another bowed its face into its outspread fingers as though it wept hysterically.

At the apartment's farther end was a high archway hung with scarlet curtains, and on either side of this, as though they mounted guard, were suits of Saracenic armor, each grasping a bare simitar in its right gauntlet, each with the hideous visage of a skull peering out from underneath the pointed cap of polished steel. From the ceiling hung a heavy lamp of hammered bronze, which was the light which Merrill saw when he first wakened.

"Uh-uh, ain't this sumpin?" a voice came to him from across the scarlet room.

He raised his head again and beheld his late traveling companion sitting on a couch which was the duplicate of his, his face clasped in his hands while he rocked his body slowly to and fro.

"If I hadn't seen it, I never woulda believed it," he solemnly announced, rising unsteadily to his feet and gazing round the room. "Yes, sir, this is certainly a case of seeing being believing—maybe. Take those fellers over there, for instance." He nodded toward the skeletons in armor. "Would you believe that you could see such things as that and still be sober? I—"

"What happened?" Merrill interjected.

"Your guess is as good as mine, maybe better. I'd just got down to take a little look-see when I thought I saw a feller climbing over the back of your car and yelled to you to duck. That's what comes of altruism. If I'd been 'tending to my own

knitting they wouldn't have pulled the well-known bag over my head; not without a struggle, anyway. Next thing I knew"—he waved a big, well-cared-for hand in an all-embracing gesture—"here we are."

"So I see," conceded Merrill tartly. "The next question is how are we to get out. I'll be hanged if I stay here one more minute—"

"Then you will certainly be hanged, I fear," a voice as soft as the purring of a cat—or the hissing of a snake—cut in, and as Merrill and his erstwhile passenger spun round they saw that a section of the scarlet wall had folded back, revealing a blind doorway in which a man was standing.

He was in evening dress, the immaculate linen and prim black broadcloth of his costume contrasting oddly with the turban of red silk which swathed his head. He might have been an Arab, perhaps an Armenian or Turk, for his face was dark, his features large and somewhat heavy, though not coarse, and the dark brown eyes beneath his heavy, high-arched brows were extraordinarily bright. There was a menacing, impenetrable, unfathomable expression in them as he bent his gaze upon the other two.

"Yes," he added with a low, sardonic chuckle, "if you are to be hanged for remaining longer than a minute, I fear you had better prepare your neck for the halter, my dear sir. You may feel it any moment, for that matter. Whether you do or not depends upon your actions and your capabilities."

"Who are you?" demanded Merrill, taking a quick step forward.

"Who are you, is more to the point," the other answered, and the smile faded from his face, leaving it instinct with cruelty.

"I refuse to answer any questions," began Merrill, but before he could continue the turbaned man struck his hands together softly, and from the passage at his back there stode two giant blacks, entirely naked save for turbans and small aprons of black silk, each carrying a heavy whip of plaited rawhide, its fourfold lashes terminating in small iron hooks.

"Will you answer, or must I use persuasion?" asked the man in

evening dress, and his eyes were hard as frozen pools of ink, while underneath the softness of his voice there lay a cutting-edge of menace.

"You win," answered the young man Merrill had befriended. "My name's Carter; Thomas Eldridge Carter; age, twenty-six; profession, accountant, at present unemployed; residence, New York. How I got here you know a damsight better than I. Anything else?"

"Do unemployed accountants usually go armed with pistols and blackjacks, Mr. Carter?" asked the turbaned man.

"They do when they're traveling through lonely parts of Long Island," answered Carter; "though for all the use I made of mine, I might as well have left the hardware home," he added with a grin.

The other ignored his pleasantry and turned a threatening glance on Merrill. "Will you answer?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm Melancthon Merrill, instructor in political philosophy at Norwood College," answered Merrill. "My special subject is ancient and mediaeval civilizations, and—"

"You are familiar with the civilization—the manners and customs—of mediaeval Syria?" cut in the other.

"Yes, to some extent. I—"

"Very well; we can find a place for you, no doubt.

"As to you," he turned to Carter, "I fear that we shall find small use for you professionally. Did you engage in athletics while at college?"

"Varsity football, basketball, track team—" young Carter catalogued tersely, but: "That will do; there will be room for you," the other interrupted.

"Zit!" the voice spoke abruptly to the black colossi, who dodged back through the open door.

There was a gentle, rustling sound, as of silk brushing silk, and where the door had been was only the brocaded wall. Next instant, like a dropping eyelid, the light winked out, and they felt the suffocating weight of utter darkness fall on them. A faintly hissing noise, like steam escaping from a kettle, sounded in the darkness, and the nauseatingly sweet odor of the anesthetic

which had rendered him unconscious on the road came to Merrill's nostrils. "Carter, Carter, where are you?" he cried in sudden panic.

"Right here, Professor, where Moses was when the lights went out, I reckon," Carter's cheerful voice responded.

"They're gassing us. That—"

"You're telling me?" Tom Carter interrupted. "Got your handkerchief?"

"Yes," Professor Merrill fumbled at his jacket pocket, dragging out the linen square.

"Good enough. Tie it round your mouth and nose. It won't help much, but it may help a little. All fixed? All right, let's try to make a break. That doorway by the skeletons might lead us somewhere."

Slowly, making heavy-footed progress as the anesthetic dulled his senses, Merrill crossed the room, found Carter's hand and grasped it firmly, then began a stumbling walk toward the doorway guarded by the armored liches.

"Careful, now," warned Carter as they felt the cool steel of the chain-mail and circled round the grisly guardians, "there may be some trick to this; it wouldn't do to have one of those swords come down and slice us."

Fighting hard for breath, Merrill volunteered no answer as with weakening knees he reached the archway, swept aside the scarlet curtains and felt frantically for the fastenings of the door. Only smoothly polished wood met his searching fingers, and with a sob of disappointment he swayed drunkenly, clutched the curtains for support, then felt himself grasped roughly by the elbow and dragged across the threshold. Feeling on the portal's farther side, Carter's hands had grasped a latch of hammered bronze, wrenched it savagely and unbarred the door.

"Well, I'm a baboon's cousin, I sure am!" announced Carter with conviction as they closed the door behind them and, leaning back against its polished planks, drank in deep drafts of fresh, untainted air.

"Where are we now?" asked Merrill, gulping down another lungful of revivifying air.

"Somewhere East of Suez, judging by the get-up of that joker we just talked to," Carter answered. "Come on, let's be moving. That getaway of ours was too easy; there's a catch to it somewhere, or I'm an ape's great-grandfather."

The room they stood in was considerably larger than the red-walled chamber they had quit. Its walls were marble or some sort of tile, pierced on three sides by low Moorish arches. Its floor was composed of alternating plinths of black and white, covered for the most part by a heavy carpet of black or some dark color which they were unable to determine, since the sole illumination of the vast apartment was a little lamp with shade of perforated bronze beneath which orchid glass was set, toning down the light till it was but a faint shade brighter than the darkness of the room behind them. Between the arches and against the solid wall were set what looked like couches piled with pillows shaped like giant mushrooms. Throughout the place there hovered perfume, not the sweet and cloying scent of the anesthetic they had fled, but something subtle, faint, intoxicating, like the delicately suggestive scent of ambergris.

"If this doesn't beat the devil," began Carter, then paused, his right hand lifted as against a blow.

Across the darkness from the great room's farther side there came a low and sobbing moan, a sound so filled with terror mixed with sorrow that it might have been the lamentation of a soul in hell.

Nodding swift command to Merrill, Carter took a quick step forward, then paused abruptly, his hand on his companion's arm. "That carpet doesn't look so good to me," he announced in an almost soundless whisper, "Too many choice places for trap-doors under it. Let's go round the long way."

Skirting the rug, treading warily on the marble pavement, lest a block give way beneath their feet, they hastened along two sides of the room, then paused to listen a moment. The moan which told them they were not alone had not been repeated, and in the tense, unbroken silence they could almost hear the beating of each other's hearts. Then the faintest echo of a sound, the

gentle rustling of a couch cover, or perhaps of a pillow being moved, led them toward the nearest archway.

Carter fumbled through his pockets, then, with an exultant sigh: "Here's one—just one," he announced. "They surely cleaned us out, but somehow they overlooked this one." A scratching on his boot sole, and a match-flame blossomed into orange light. For a moment it glared against their eyes with the blinding brilliance of full sunlight; then as the sputtering flare grew steady as it took hold of the wood, the men fell backward simultaneously with a gasp of stark astonishment upon their lips.

A face, a woman's face, sad, beautiful and frightened, looked up at them across the match-flame. The eyes were blue, shading to violet tints, large, fringed with curling lashes, moist and weary with tears. Her chestnut hair, with deep, shadow-laden waves, was cut squarely across her forehead in front, almost level with her delicately arching brows; at the sides and back it was cropped off in a straight line which barely left her ear lobes visible. The nose was small and delicate with slender nostrils, the lips full, gently arched and rouged a brilliant red; the ivory pallor of her cheeks was enhanced by the shadow of long, silken lashes. Save for a pair of Oriental breastplates done in silver filigree and harnessed round her shoulders with fine silver chains, broad silver slave-bracelets hung with tiny bells and a pair of bell-hung anklets, she was nude, a lovely statuette of pallid flesh and shadow against the purple robe and pillows of the couch.

The fingers of one hand, stained brilliant red from nails to knuckles, were pressed against her mouth as though to stifle back a cry, and over them the wide, black-fringed eyes dilated in the sudden glare of match-light. The hand slid downward from her mouth and rested on her throat, as though to ease the passage of the breath which halted there.

"Wh—who are you?" she whispered thickly as the match-flame flickered and went out. Then, before the men could answer:

"What are you doing here? Have they discovered you? Oh—quick, before they find you, kill me—kill me quickly, for pity's sake!"

"Take it easy, sister," urged Tom Carter. "Who—what are you?"

"Dale Car—O God, I forgot! Zil-i-Gulab is my name. I'm a slave."

"A what? Haven't you heard of Marse Lincoln's proclamation—"

The girl broke in with frightened haste. "You've only just come here; you don't understand. I'm a slave, I tell you, a helpless, willess chattel; I have no right to speak or act, not even to think, except as I am ordered, and death by torture follows disobedience!"

"H'm, not so good," Tom Carter murmured thoughtfully. "How'd you get into this jam?"

"I was driving in from Great South Bay one night, I don't remember just how long ago—one loses count of time in here—and just as I came to a big tree by the salt marshes I saw another car coming head-on at me. I swerved to the right, and it swerved, too. I knew there'd be a crash unless I left the road, so I steered into the marsh. The car turned over in the ditch, and when I came to I was here stripped naked, with these rings fastened in my ears"—she raised her hand to touch the four-inch silver hoops which pierced her ear lobes—"and they told me I must stay here always and do exactly as they told me, or they'd torture me to death. They'll do it, too—I saw a girl—oh, please, if you've sisters of your own and they mean anything to you, kill me; choke me, break my neck, do anything—only kill me before—

"S-s-sh!" she paused abruptly, finger raised to lips. "Somebody's coming. Quick, hide behind the couch. If they catch you here your lives aren't worth a puff of smoke."

Reluctantly but swiftly Merrill and Carter dropped between the couch and wall, and scarcely had they found concealment when the shuffle of soft shoes against the marble pavement told them that the girl's quick hearing had not been mistaken.

Even in the dim, uncertain light they saw the newcomer was hideous. Stooped and bent with the unmistakable deformity of a hunchback, his body was nevertheless broad and powerful, and the hands which hung down well below his knees were of

extraordinary size and obviously strong as those of a gorilla. The hairy, pock-marked face, the inflamed eyelids, the fangs that gleamed from receding gums together formed a countenance repulsive as a mediaeval artist's conception of the Devil. An enormous turban of blue silk was swathed about the creature's head; loose, baggy trousers of canary yellow, gathered tightly at the ankles, encased his nether limbs; upon his broad and splay-boned feet were slippers of soft leather. In one hand he bore a three-lashed whip of plaited rawhide, each lash tipped with a small bead of iron.

As the visitant came through the arch the girl sprang nimbly from her couch, dropped to her knees, crossed her feet one above the other, then fell forward on her face, arms trailing backward beside her prostrate body, the hands lying palm-upward in sign of absolute submission.

The hunchback looked at her a moment, then stepping forward thrust a slippered foot against her face as a cruel master might spurn a cringing dog. "Art ready, creature?" he demanded in a high-pitched, crackling voice.

"Harkening and obedience, master of my breath," the girl responded meekly.

"It is well. Two more recruits have come to join the Sheik Al-Jebal's forces. We must make them welcome with our usual hospitality. Come, example of unparalleled uncouthness, and see that thou playest thy part with ardor."

He turned upon his heel and the girl rose silently and followed him, eyes cast demurely down, arms close at sides, wrists bent, hands held out sharply at right angles to her body.

"Well I'll adopt an orphan kangaroo!" Carter muttered as the tinkle of the girl's ankle-bells faded to an echo. "Can you imagine a snatch racket like that being pulled on the South Shore of Long Island in the Twentieth Century?"

"Carter," Merrill told him solemnly, "I think we're up against the biggest thing that's been known here since the Molly Maguires terrorized Pennsylvania. Did you hear what that hunchback told that girl?"

"H'm," Carter scratched his chin reflectively. "He told her to

do her stuff, for they'd signed up two new members of the lodge—meaning you and me, I take it, and—"

"Precisely. And—"

"I don't think I quite follow you, Professor."

"Perhaps you don't; the reference might have been obscure. Did you ever hear of the Sheik Al-Jebal, the Old Man of the Mountain?"

"Why, sure. He's a character in the *Arabian Nights*, isn't he? The one Sinbad the Sailor met—"

"He certainly was not," Professor Merrill contradicted. "He was the absolute ruler of the greatest and most dreaded secret organization of the Middle Ages, the order of Assassins, which was the terror of the world for two centuries. Because they had their headquarters on Mount Lebanon, their ruler was referred to by the Crusaders as the Old Man of the Mountain. His Arabic title was Sheik Al-Jebal, Master of the Mountain, and—"

Carter snapped his fingers sharply. "I get it!" he announced. "That understudy to the Black Crook said, 'Two new recruits to the Sheik Al-Jebal's forces!' Whoever heads this outfit is carrying on the reincarnation of that old geezer from Mount Lebanon. Boy, are we in with one swell bunch of murderers, or are we in with 'em?"

"I rather think we are," responded the professor with a wry grimace, "and if I'm not mistaken, they're looking for us now."

Even as he spoke there came the thud of slippers on the marble floor, and a squad of turbaned warriors armed with gleaming simitars crowded through an archway.

"Jig's up, Professor, nothing for it but to give'em the works," said Carter cheerfully, leaping from the shelter of the couch and facing their pursuers.

"Come and get it, you gazabos," he invited, snatching the cover from the nearest couch and twirling it before him as a toreador whirls his cloak to lure the bull to charge.

Startled by his strange maneuver of defense, no less than by his sudden appearance, the armed men hesitated for a second, and while they bunched together at the doorway Carter thew the robe, enveloping the heads of the four nearest to him. With a

bellow he was on them, striking flailing fist-blows, kicking viciously, shouting wild defiance.

Professor Merrill grasped a pillow from the nearest couch, and holding it before him as a shield rushed on a swordsman who escaped the robe that Carter flung. The man swung at him with his gleaming blade; Merrill caught the down-stroke on his pillow, and ere his enemy could raise his simitar to strike again, kicked him in the stomach, seized the weapon which fell clattering to the floor, and rushed to Carter's aid.

"Atta baby, Prof!" yelled Carter as he swung an uppercut which sent a turbaned swordsman doubled up against the wall: "Give'em the business. We'll stand these babies up—duck! they're flanking us!"

The warning came a thought too late. While they engaged the squad of guards, another party had slipped through an archway, circled round them and, as Carter yelled, descended on them from the rear.

Professor Merrill staggered backward, tripping as he reeled, felt the semi-darkness deepen to absolute blackness as a pall descended on his head, and once more smelled the sweetish, pungent odor of the anesthetic which had overcome him on the road. He heard Tom Carter choke and gasp as he, too, fell a victim to the rear attack, seemed to feel his head expanding like a rubber bladder pumped with air, beheld a myriad flashing lights before his eyes, then buckled at the knees and sank down limply on the purple carpet, like a doll from which the sawdust has run out.

WITH A START LIKE THAT of one who wakens at the cachinnation of an alarm clock, Professor Merrill came to consciousness. He was lying on a couch which stood some eighteen inches from the floor of a small whitewashed room illuminated by a swinging three-wicket brazen lamp hung pendant from the ceiling. Another couch like his against the farther wall, a little table of dark wood inlaid with brass and holding trays of fruits and sweetmeats, and a thin, hard Hamadan carpet seemed to be the room's sole furnishings.

"Carter!" he called. "Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

"Mr. Carter's quite all right, Professor," came a soft voice from the arching doorway. "He did some injury to our men before they could subdue him, but, except for ruffled dignity, I think he suffered nothing."

Turning on his pillow Merrill recognized the speaker as the man whom they had met when first recovering consciousness after their kidnapping. He had changed his Occidental evening clothes for a long, tight-fitting garment of white linen on the left breast of which was stamped or painted the device of a scarlet, hiltless dagger. Instead of patent-leather evening pumps he wore soft slippers of red leather with exaggeratedly turned-up toes. His turban was replaced by a red fez at least a full size large for him, so that it rested almost on his ears. As he turned his head Professor Merrill saw the scalp below his fez was innocent of hair. The man was bald as an egg.

"Where——" began Professor Merrill, then checked abruptly as he sat bolt-upright on his couch. His clothes were gone, and in their place was a knee-length sleeveless garment of white linen, bound about the middle with a scarlet sash, blazoned on the left breast with the design of a scarlet dagger. Beside his bed he saw a red tarboosh and a pair of heelless red Morocco slippers.

"I say—" involuntarily the professor raised a hand to his head, then brought it down with an exclamation of dismay. Instead of curling brown hair, lightly mixed with gray, his fingers had encountered naked, smooth-shaved scalp.

"My clothes—my hair—" he stammered wrathfully, his anger rendering him almost incoherent.

The other smiled, not pleasantly. "I shouldn't use the possessive case if I were you, Professor," he advised. "Everything here, including your clothes, your hair and yourself, is the absolute property of the Master"—as he spoke the name he crossed his hands upon his breast, closed his eyes and bowed his head in reverence—"to do with as he pleases.

"And while we are about it, you will hereafter be known as Iskandar. Is that plain? Once one has had the ineffable honor of being accepted as the Master's slave his other worldly attributes

are cast aside; he has no name, no title, no individuality, no right to live, save as it may please the Master to bestow them. All things here are his, to give or take away."

"I'll be damned—" began Professor Merrill, but the other cut him short.

"You will surely think yourself in hell, whether you are damned or not, if you have occasion to encounter the dispensers of discipline, Come, follow me; a little object lesson may suffice to break your stubborn pride."

Reluctantly, but filled with curiosity, Merrill rose and donned his fez and slippers. They passed along a narrow, lamplit corridor, passed half a dozen guarded doors, finally began descending a steep spiral stair which led down in a sort of well. Seventy steps, each about a foot in height, Merrill counted before his guide halted at a door of heavy planks crossbarred with iron, and rapped upon it sharply.

As the portal swung before them on a pair of creaking hinges a dank, damp odor, reminiscent of a cellar—or a tomb—assailed their nostrils, and from the darkness of the vault there came a little sobbing, whimpering sound, as though a child were suffering.

"Lights, O monstrous uncouthness!" growled the guide, and in a moment came the click of flint on steel, the glow of tinder set afire, finally the thin, unsteady gleaming of a candle-lantern. The man who held the light was scarcely visible, his form looming dimly indistinct, like a shadow thrown upon a shadow, but Professor Merrill's interest in the lantern-bearer ceased as he beheld the form the feeble light shone on.

It was a girl, young, beautiful, exquisitely fashioned, but so racked with pain and helpless agony that she scarcely seemed a human thing. Her feet were fixed in stocks set some two feet from the floor, her body was supported on her upright arms. Beneath her, where her head and shoulders must inevitably rest when the weakening arms could no longer support her body weight, was a plank thick set with eight-inch, needle-pointed spikes. A mass of pockmark-wounds, thick with drying blood, upon her neck and shoulders told where she had once let herself

down for an instant's respite, then forced her tortured arms once more to raise her pain-racked body to the level of her feet.

"She disobeyed an order," Merrill's guide said softly. "Those who fail to do the instant bidding of the Master or the servants who transmit his orders get no second chance. She has been here for three hours. She should not last—"

"*Yah Sidi,* kill me; kill me quickly, for the memory of your mother!" begged the girl through writhing lips. "I can't stand it—"

"O countenance of misfortune, this is thine own doing," answered Merrill's guide. "Our lord was very merciful; he forgave thy first transgression with no more punishment than the lash, but he has no use for those who scorn his clemency. Pray for death, daughter of a pig; it is thy sole chance of release."

The girl's eyes widened in the candlelight. Her small, white teeth clinched on her lower lip until a little stream of mixed blood and spittle trickled down her chin. "Damn you!" she screamed; "damn you for the rotten beasts you are!" and bent her arms till the biceps stood out in little knots against her pallid skin. A moment she poised thus, then straightened both her arms, forcing her body upward in a little spring, and let herself fall back.

The muscles of her torso rippled in reflex reaction as the cruel spikes pierced her back and neck, but she gave no cry. Merrill felt a wave of nausea sweeping over him, but checked it as he realized death had dealt her quick release. He knew enough anatomy to convince him that a spike had pierced her spinal column, severing it at once and bringing instant surcease of all suffering.

"Too bad," remarked his guide, "I must have the torture-master whipped for that; those spikes should be so placed that prisoners undergoing torture can't kill themselves so easily." He chuckled softly; then:

"That is just a little object lesson, Iskandar. Should you prove difficult we might give you a worse punishment than that. For instance—" he laid a hand upon Professor Merrill's arm and drew him toward a narrow door pierced with an iron grille. "Look in," he ordered tersely.

As the attendant flashed the lantern rays into the darkened chamber Merrill glimpsed a movement in the shadow, then heard a low, warning hiss. Half coiled upon the sand with which the little room was floored, but undulating in knots and bends and subtle figure-eights, was a great python, fully twenty feet in length.

"He's hungry, you see," the guide advised him with a laugh. "He eats but once in thirty days or so, and we haven't had a prisoner for him in some time. Think of that, Iskandar. Remember that the Master's little pet is hungry—very very hungry—if you feel an inclination to disobey the slightest order which is given you. Shall we go? Your friend Mansur—he who was Thomas Carter—will be returning soon, and you'll be interested in hearing his experiences, as he will be in hearing yours."

WHEN TOM CARTER opened his eyes they looked upon a garden, or rather on the simulation of a garden. In a long, vaulted hall whose ceiling, painted blue, was pierced with little star-shaped holes through which soft lightrays filtered, was spread a heavy carpet of dull green, while here and there stood wide-mouthed vases, big as tubs, in which were set orange, palm or rose trees, all cunningly finished to simulate the living growths. White pigeons perched in the trees, or walked about beneath them, heads bobbing, wings aflutter, pausing now and then to utter resonant coos and engage in violent love-making. Here and there beneath the trees were little bright-hued rugs, and on them men were lying. Drunk, they seemed at first, yet at a second glance he decided otherwise. Rather, it seemed, they were mad, or held in some strange seizure, for they lay there, staring at the artificial sky, muttering strange, half-audible phrases of endearment, while on their faces were expressions of wild, unholy rapture. Sometimes they rose with difficulty and lurched a few unsteady steps with outspread hands until their arms closed as though enfolding an invisible form, and as they acted this strange pantomime they babbled incoherent words through lips

so flaccid that they could not frame the syllables they sought to say.

"Tommy, old scout, you're in a bughouse, no doubt of it," he told himself, watching a nearby man rise, stagger a few steps and fall. But:

"What the cross-eyed devil;" he ejaculated softly as he saw an unclothed woman glide out from the shelter of a bank of potted palms, kneel a moment at the fallen man's head and whisper in his ear. Then from a silver jar she detached the wide-mouthed silver goblet which served it as a lid, poured out a draft of amber-colored liquor and held it up to the man's mouth, supporting his head in the crook of her free elbow as a mother might hold up the head of a sick child to whom she gave a dose of medicine.

The man drank greedily, held up his hands to stroke the fair cup-bearer's cheeks, but fell back in a sort of swoon, lying rigidly upon his rug, staring sightlessly with wide-set, dreamy eyes up to the painted ceiling.

"Well, I should kiss a small-sized monkey!" muttered Carter, sitting up upon his rug. "If that bird ain't—hey, what the sizzling hell?" Sitting, he discovered that his legs and feet were bare, and that a sleeveless linen smock, closebelted with a sash of crimson silk, replaced the garments he had worn. He dropped back to the rug, staring at the branches of the imitation rose tree under which he lay; then. "What's the matter with my head?" he asked, sat up again and raised a hand to the back of his neck. His fingers traveled upward, clear across the vault of his skull, down to his forehead, encountering no resistance. "Well, I'll be a Republican in Mississippi! Bald!" he exclaimed. Half rising from his rug, he sat again in utter, stupefied amazement.

The tinkling chime of silver anklebells fell on his ears as three girls ran swiftly into view. Like the girl whom he and Merrill had discovered earlier, they were naked, save for silver ornaments on breast and wrist and ankle, and in their youthful nakedness their beauty was so poignant that it struck him like a blow. One bore a zither, another wore small silver cymbals on her thumbs and forefingers, the third held poised between her delicate,

long-fingered hands a crystal goblet fashioned like a lotus bud, and in it glowed an amber-colored liquor.

Kneeling on the grass-green carpet at his feet, the women smiled at him seductively, and as the zither-player struck her cords and the cymbal-wearer clashed her little silver plates together with a chiming, clinking rhythm which beat out the tempo, the girl who bore the cup began to sing in a high, thin soprano:

The nightingale sings in the rose tree,
The moon breasts the surf of the sky,
And the glance of thine eyes holds me bound in a thrall,
For the slave of thy passion am I.

A girdle to bind round thy waist,
Or a brooch at thy throat I would be,
Or I'd turn to the shoe which is happily placed
On thy foot to be trod by thee . . .

And now soft, scented arms slipped round his neck, and a woman's cheek touched his, while a woman's soft hands turned his face from the musicians and her lips sought his in breathless eagerness. As she kissed him she opened her mouth, and the scent of her breath was the scent of perfumed wine, stirring his befuddled senses, rousing his pulses to a furious drum-beat of desire.

"O moon of my delight, O heart of a thousand roses," the girl whispered between kisses almost fierce as bites, "O essence of apples in the sweetness of full summer—*now do you realize why I asked you to kill me in that room back there?* O bringer of delights— *I must do this with any man they say, or perish by the death of spikes or by the snake*—lie in my arms, beloved, cool thy hot face between my bosoms—*for God's sake, realize I'm forced to this and be kind to me*— O song of the nightingale, O perfume of the jasmine flower—*don't swallow any of the wine; hold it in your mouth and pretend to get drunk quickly!*" She signed to

the woman with the cup, took it from her and held it to his lips.

He followed her instructions, drinking in the strong, musk-scented wine, holding it in his mouth till he thought his cheeks would burst. The girl leant over him, interposing herself between him and the others; as he finished drinking she flung the cup across her shoulder, wrapped him in her arms, pressing her slender perfumed body close to his as she bore him backward.

"Quick," she whispered fiercely as his shoulders touched the rug, "lean over me, pretend to kiss me, and let the wine run from your mouth into mine." She twined herself about him, bending her head and shoulders to the side until his face was over hers, the back of his shaven head hiding their lips from the other women. "Now!" she commanded, placing opened lips against his mouth.

Carter drew his lips apart, felt the flow of perfumed wine across them, sensed, rather than saw, that the girl had turned her face aside, letting the liquor spill from her mouth onto the green carpet. Then she was kissing him again, whispering almost soundlessly between caresses: "I've saved your soul—for a little while—now pretend to be unconscious. Don't close your eyes, just lie here like the other men and seem to dream!"

"O.K., sister, I get you," he replied, giving her a quick kiss in return, then slowly loosed his hold upon her shoulders, let his hands fall flaccidly beside him, finally lay staring with wide eyes up at the painted ceiling.

"Hou," laughed the girl who played the zither, "the wine worked quickly with that one. By Allah, were I a man I should not let thee go so quickly, little Zil-i-Gulab, though they gave me wine enough to drown a whale!"

Carter had not watched the other men in vain. For something like five minutes he lay staring at the vaulted roof, then began to mutter vaguely, half rose from his couch, dropped back again, hiding his face upon his folded arms and occasionally kicking restlessly, like a sleeper troubled in his dreams.

"Smart girl," he told himself, gradually working his sleeping-rug over the spot of moisture left when she spat out the wine. "That stuff was drugged, no doubt of it; that's why those

birds act so cuckoo. And they make her act like that—the poor kid! I'd like to wring their necks! Guess it's my best bet to lie here quietly, though, and see what happens next."

He rested his cheek upon his folded arm and stared across the green-floored room, nor was it the drugged wine that brought the dreamy look into his eyes. Soft arms about his neck, soft, scented lips on his, the thrill of love words whispered close against his mouth—even if she had done it because they made her it was sweet, he told himself. Suppose they hadn't forced her to make love to him, would she—

A shuffling step beside him woke him from his revery and he looked up to behold the man whom he and Merrill had encountered in the red room standing by him, smiling. "Are you able to stand, Mansur?" he asked with a knowing laugh.

"Mansur?" echoed Carter.

"That is your name henceforth," the other answered with a sudden tightening of his lips. "See that you recognize it when you hear it called."

"O.K.," responded Carter. "What's next?" He sat up unsteadily, holding his hands against his temples. "Gosh, that's powerful stuff—guess I took a little bit too much," he confided with a shamefaced grin.

"Your companion Iskandar is waiting in your chamber," his guide informed him as they traversed a long corridor. "Tomorrow you and he shall stand before the Presence to receive your orders. You will probably be assigned to the guard, for you are a good fighter."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd like to have a job that'll keep me in touch with that little bimbo I met back in the garden," Carter answered.

"Silence!" snapped the other. "All things are as the Master" he bowed his head in homage · "wills. The favors of the women of the garden are bestowed as a reward of merit, and the woman in whose arms you lie is she the Master chooses. For those who prove refractory we have other methods of reward. Iskandar will tell you of it."

"Who the deuce is Iskandar?"

"The man who came here with you. And you must no longer address me so familiarly. I am majordomo of the palace, and as such am called Excellence or, when spoken to directly, *yah Sidi.* Do you understand?"

"O.K.," responded Carter, and next instant started back with flaming cheeks, for his guide had struck him in the face.

"Do you need the lash to teach you humbleness, or have you learned to speak becomingly?" snarled the guide.

Carter's right hand knotted to a fist, but better judgment conquered anger. "Yes, *yah Sidi,*" he replied.

A slave was kneeling on the marble pavement at the passage bend, a little, paunchy man with shaven head, clothed only in a breech-clout. Beside him was a pail of soapy water, in one hand he held a cloth with which he scrubbed the marble tiles, and as he worked the tears fell from his eyes, making little splashes in the dirty water of his pail.

"That one was marked for favor, but he forfeited it by disobedience," the majordomo said. "We had to lash him twice, and then we took him down to visit Naa. I do not think that he will give us further trouble."

As they neared the scrubbing man he glanced up quickly, saw who came, and dropped his wash-rag in his pail, then bent his forehead to the floor, clasping his hands across the nape of his neck. Across his naked back a lattice-work of angry, half-healed lash marks showed.

"O miserable descendant of misbegotten pigs," said Carter's guide, "lift up your uncouth countenance that we may look upon it."

In trembling obedience the prostrate man complied, and Carter put his hand across his mouth to stifle back a gasp, but the majordomo was too intent upon the kneeling wretch to notice his amazement.

"Pick up thy pail, thou thing of filth," the majordomo ordered, and as the trembling slave obeyed: "Lift it to thy lips and drink, drink every drop it holds, or—"

Something like relief showed in the scullion's face as he raised the pail of foul water to his mouth. "Harkening and obedience,

yah Sidi; Allah bless thee for thy clemency!" he replied through trembling lips, and began to gulp the contents of his scrub-pail as though it had been nectar.

"Thus am I obeyed by all save one in this place," Carter's guide informed him as they turned away.

PROFESSOR MERRILL SAT UPON his couch, elbows on knees, hands clasped before him, staring moodily at the floor between his slippered feet. "Hullo, Carter," he greeted without raising his eyes as his fellow prisoner joined him. "Where've you been?"

"Man," answered Carter, dropping down upon his couch, "I've been in heaven, or in the best little imitation of the Prophet's paradise to come you're likely to find this side of Jordan. Listen." Briefly, he recited his adventures; then:

"Wonder what that poor kid meant when she said she had to act that way or suffer death by spikes or the snake? Where were you while this was going on, Prof.?"

"In hell," the other answered. "You saw the bestial system of rewards they have; I saw their beastly punishments. You asked about the spiked death, and the snake? Here's what she meant—"

"Well, I'll be a chimpanzee's first cousin, darned if I won't!" ejaculated Carter as Merrill ended his recital. "So that's the kind of guys these guys are, eh? So long, Prof., I'll be seeing you."

"Where are you going?"

"Snooping. Just snooping, Professor. Everything seems quiet on the Western Front right now."

He was gone an hour, and his boyish grin seemed even wider than usual when he returned. "Found out lots of things, Professor," he announced. "Practically everything except what I wanted to know. I don't suppose it's any news to you that we're in a kind of cellar, but maybe you'll be interested to know we're under water for the most part. Yes, sir, this entire place is hollowed out of the mud under the salt marshes; we can't be more than half a mile from the road. There are about forty people here, all told. You and I and the girl and another feller are the only folks from this neck of the woods. The rest are

Simon-pure Syrians, imported to this country by the boss clown of this crazy circus. Maybe the immigration officers wouldn't like to hear about that, eh?"

"The girl I saw kill herself was kidnapped, too," Merrill added, "and we don't know how many others have died here. Who's the other man?"

"Max Mendelbaum."

"What, the broker who disappeared two months ago?"

"Righto. I ran on him by accident; caught him mopping floors. He's worth a hundred thousand to us, too."

"To us?"

"Oh, excuse me, I forgot you didn't know. That line I gave the first assistant boss out in the red room about my being an unemployed accountant was purest hooey undefiled. I'm an investigator for the Grand Central Life Assurance Company. Mendelbaum and Steinmann, his partner, had policies of a hundred thousand dollars on each other's lives. At eight o'clock in the evening of May 31 Max Mendelbaum left Patchogue in his car, headed for New York. It was a foggy night along the South Shore Road, and next morning State troopers found Mendelbaum's car wrecked beside a big tree growing at the roadside, and the body of his colored chauffeur lying not far away. The colored man was murdered, killed by a knife wound, but of Mendelbaum there was no trace, nor could any clue to him be found. No letters demanding ransom money have been received by his family, so Steinmann's on our necks to pay him the face value of the policy. I'd been scouting round near where Mendelbaum's car was found when I met you, and—boy, there's a connection there, sure as a gun's made of iron!"

"What?" asked Merrill listlessly.

"That tree, man. It's the only piece of vegetation higher than your head for miles around; Mendelbaum's car was wrecked near it, we saw that phantom car bearing down on us almost in its shadow just before they hung the bag on us; that little girl—you know, the one they call Zil-i-Gulab · told us she had the same experience. Yes, sir, the answer's bound up somewhere in that tree or I'm an organgrinder's monkey."

"What difference does it make?" Merrill rejoined. "Your man Mendelbaum may be worth a hundred thousand to your company outside, but he's about as useful to you here as a bag of gold would be to a starving shipwrecked sailor on a desert island."

"Oh yeah?" Carter answered with a grin. "You just keep an eye on Uncle Thomas. I'm going to salaam these guys up one side and down the other, string along with 'em like nobody's business, and keep both eyes wide open. Sooner or later I'll find the exit to this dump, and when I do we'll all go bye-bye!"

"Humph!" grunted Merrill as he lay down on his couch and composed himself for sleep.

HOW LONG THEY SLEPT neither of them knew, for their watches had been taken from them with their clothes, and in all the subterranean place there seemed to be no sort of timepiece.

Carter wakened first, feeling himself prodded in the back by something hard. Rolling over with a yawn he beheld the hunchbacked dwarf standing over him, whip in hand, an evil smile upon his ugly features.

"Rise, O man," the hunchback ordered harshly. "The hour has come for you to lick the dust before the Presence."

"Yeah?" responded Carter. "Be careful how you use that whip when I'm around, feller, or you'll be eating whole mouthfuls of dust, an' not tasting 'em. Do I get breakfast?"

The hunchback pointed to the taboret on which there stood a bowl of fruit, then indicated a heap of clothes which lay beside the couch. "Make haste and dress," he ordered. "I wait without."

"Suits me," responded Carter; "I'd a dam' sight rather see your back than your face, any time.

"Hey, Prof.," he shook Professor Merrill by the shoulder, "get up. We're going to a party, and our little playmate's brought us some new pretties."

The costumes which the dwarf had brought consisted of short white linen smocks, embroidered on the breast with the emblem of the scarlet dagger, longer coats of violet silk with loosely flowing sleeves, turbans of red silk and soft red leather slippers. A

waist shawl of yellow silk completed the ensemble. Arrayed in their new finery they ate a little fruit, drank a goblet of water and joined their ill-favored guide.

Down several winding corridors they passed, glimpsing the garden where Carter had awakened the evening previous, coming at last to halt before a curtained archway guarded by two men in chainmail, drawn swords in their hands. These eyed them stonily, but offered neither salute nor hindrance as they passed through the portal in the wake of their misshapen conductor.

"Excellence," announced the hunchback, "here are the two new ones, ready to be received by the Presence." He groveled like an ingratiating dog before the majordomo.

The latter was gorgeously appareled. A suit of glittering chain-mail clothed him from throat to ankles, and upon his head he wore a conical steel cap fitted with a nose guard. Belted to his waist was a jeweled simitar, while a cloak of violet tissue hung from his shoulders nearly to his heels. Slippers of blue leather worked with silver were upon his feet.

Kneeling before him on the marble floor were Zil-i-Gulab and the three girls who had been her companions in the garden, one carrying her zither, one wearing tiny silver cymbals on her finger tips, the third bearing a little golden pipe.

The majordomo clapped his hands and the three musicians rose, advanced a pace and made him a low reverence, whereupon to the tinkling accompaniment of finger-cymbals, pipe and zither took up a low, wailing tune, the players keeping time by stamping their feet and turning rhythmically as they advanced toward a curtained doorway at the long hall's farther end. Zil-i-Gulab poised upon her henna-painted toes, raised her arms above her head, turning her hands inward, fingers tip to tip, and began to spin, whirling faster and faster, till the hawk bills on her wrists and ankles rang so rapidly that their music seemed a high, continuous whir. Thus preceded, the majordomo motioned Merrill and Carter to follow, and the strange procession made its way along the corridor.

Guards drew aside the silken draperies of the door, that the

dancing women might proceed unhindered, and the three men entered in their wake.

The room was walled with gold, vaulted at the roof with gleaming silver, floored with stone of bloody red. Scores of lamps burned brightly, striking back dazzling reflections from the burnished metal walls and ceiling. A line of guards was drawn up across the farther wall, their shining naked swords catching bright reflections from the lamps and walls and glistening ceiling. Along the room's sides was ranged a miscellany of the palace servants, women veiled and unveiled, clothed, partly clothed, and wholly nude, black slaves in turban and breech-clout, white slaves similarly attired; among them Carter noted Mendelbaum.

Surrounded by the line of guards, a dais of polished wood was raised, its entire top covered by a scarlet pillow fully a foot thick and obviously filled with some soft wadding, for the man upon it had sunk down until he seemed almost enveloped in its billowing folds. He was a little man, scarcely larger than a child, but the head which topped his narrow shoulders was enormous, and its size was magnified by the huge red turban which he wore. All red—the monstrous pillow, the robe worn by him who sat upon it, the turban bound about his head, the jewels which glistened on his claw-like hands. But his face was pasty-pale, and from it looked a pair of hot, dry, glittering eyes, unchanging in expression, unwinking in their fixed, set stare as those of some great snake.

Despite themselves the visitors trembled. They were men, this was a man, but between them the contrast was like that of life to death, or sanity to madness.

"Lord love a duck!" Tom Carter whispered. "If it ain't -"

"Men of earth, ye stand before the Lord of Life and Death. Draw nigh and give your homage!" the majordomo cried, dropping to his knees and bending till his forehead nearly touched the floor.

Zil-i-Gulab ceased her whirling dance, ran forward and flung herself facedownward on the floor, arms stretched to fullest length before her, palms up, feet crossed, the instep of the right resting in the hollow of the sole of the left. The musicians

prostrated themselves, too, but instead of lying rigid as Zil-i-Gulab did, they writhed upon the scarlet stones, weaving a sort of pattern with their naked bodies, the quick ripple of their pallid flesh like the motion of water stirred by wind. A thrill of revulsion ran through Carter and Merrill simultaneously as they saw the four women had thrust forth their tongues and were licking at the pavement while they lay prostrate.

"Down, slaves, and lick the dust!" cried the majordomo, rising from his knees and glaring at Merrill and Carter.

"Oh, please, please don't anger him!" Zil-i-Gulab raised her forehead from the floor and looked across her shoulder, terror in her violet eyes as she besought obedience to the order.

The form upon the cushion stirred—it was like the stirring of a serpent when something angers it—and a low hiss issued from it.

"Who dares to speak unbidden in the Presence of the Master?" cried the majordomo, and from the huddled heap upon the cushion came two words:

"The lash!"

"Forgive be merciful have pity, Awful Master!" Zil-i-Gulab cowered till it seemed she sought to force her body through the scarlet paving-stones, balling her hands into little fists and beating them, her crossed feet and her forehead against the floor in a very ecstasy of terror and supplication.

"Silence, thing!" the majordomo shouted, and the hunchback dwarf sidled forward with a gliding walk, his cruel irontipped whip coiled about his wrist, a grin of savage expectation on his hideous countenance.

He drew the lash back quickly, whirled it twice about his head so that it whistled with a vicious hissing scream, then dropped back on one foot, poised the whip for a down-stroke which should cut the tender, wincing back to ribbons, and—fell sprawling to the floor, blood spurting from his mashed lips as Tom Carter drove a fist into his leering, twisted mouth.

Berserk, Carter faced the startled guards and slaves. "Any of you other birds want a taste of this?" he shook his clenched fist aloft. "There's plenty more where that came from!

"As for you, you damned, murdering lunatic—" he made a

spring toward the form huddled on the scarlet cushion, but a dozen guardsmen fell upon him and bore him cursing to the floor.

"Shall I strike, my lord?" asked the majordomo, unsheathing his simitar and standing over Carter.

"No," came the whispered answer. "Put him in restraint until the second hour of the watch; then let him go to dine with Naa."

A stillness filled the room, a breathless silence such as men maintain when they look full-featured in the bare-boned face of death. Naa, the great snake, the mighty breaker of bones, the monster who could crush a man as easily as a man could crush an egg—and who was active now with appetite, having fasted thirty days!

Only the faint, whimpering sobs of the nude girl groveling prostrate on the floor and the heavy breathing of the guards, still panting from their fight with Carter, sounded as the armed men closed about their prisoner and half led, half dragged him from the room.

ARMS BOUND BEHIND HIM AT THE ELBOWS, naked as the instant he first looked upon the world, Tom Carter stood between his guards at the torture chamber entrance.

"Open!" cried the palace majordomo, striking on the panels with the pommel of his sword. "One comes to dine with Naa!"

"Do we accompany thee, *yah Sidi?"* asked a guardsman, grinning in anticipation of the show.

"No, it is not meant that any but me, who am the Master's other self, and the torturers, who never leave their posts, should see this spectacle of death," the majordomo answered. "Stand ye here and wait my coming forth." To Carter: "Go forward, creature of calamity; a soft embrace awaits thee."

A shuffling step was heard within the torture dungeon, bolts squealed, a bar fell clanking, and the heavy, iron-bound door creaked open a few inches.

"Lights, fool, knowest thou not I bring a guest for Lord Naa's table?" cried the majordomo as they stood in utter darkness

while the dungeon door creaked shut and heavy bolts were drawn across it.

The click of flint on steel, the brightening glow of tinder blown upon, finally the feeble gleam of candlelight showed through the gloom as the torture-master raised his lantern, flashing it on Carter's white, drawn face and straining shoulder muscles. Then the lamp was lowered, clearing a little path of light across the dungeon floor, a path which marked Tom Carter's *Via Dolorosa.*

A hand fell on his arm to guide him, and he started at the contact. It was no calloused palm, worn horny by the rack and torture-irons, but a soft, slim hand, a hand whose questing fingers fluttered searchingly along his forearm, feeling for the rawhide thongs that bound his elbows. He felt the first cord give, the second and the third fall off as steel sheared through them, then suddenly realized that his arms were free and that a knife-haft had been slipped into his hand.

No order was required. Swiftly as a striking snake he turned, drove the knife blade handle-deep into the majordomo's throat, then, as a spate of blood gushed on his fingers, gave the steel a wrenching twist.

The fellow staggered backward with a strangling cry. *"Ahee,"* one guardsman murmured to the other as he drew his ear back from the door, "my lord Naa wasted little time to make his kill today, it seems."

Light fingers flickered upward through the dark, feeling Carter's cheeks. "Are you all right?" a girl's voice whispered tremulously. "They haven't hurt you?"

"Zil-i-Gulab!" Carter cried out. "How did —"

"S-s-sh!" she laid a warning finger on his lips. "Speak softly, dear; we've only a few minutes."

"But, Zil —"

"Don't call me that, my dear. For the little while I have of life, I'll be Dale Carswell once again."

He took her cheeks between his palms. "How did you manage it, and *why* did you take this awful risk, honey?" he asked softly. "You might have stayed up there, and—"

"What is your name?" she interrupted in a whisper.

"Tom Carter."

"Then listen, Tommy darling. This is no time to heed convention. I love you; I've loved you from the moment I first saw you, and when you knocked that eunuch down when he was about to flog me, I knew you'd sealed your fate – and mine. 'Whither thou goest I will go, where thou diest I will die,' Tom dear.

"I stole drugged wine and brought it to the torturers. They seldom are admitted to the garden, and they'd sell their souls for a cup of wine mixed with gunjah. They're lying here unconscious now. Then I took the gunjah that they used to drug the wine and smeared the feathers of four pigeons with it. I put them in Naa's den, and he swallowed them. Now he's so stupefied that he can hardly move."

"Dale dear," said Tom, and his voice was well-nigh silenced by the pounding of his heart, "say you'll marry me when we get out of here."

The girl laughed softly, mirthlessly. "There is neither marrying nor giving in marriage where we're going when we get out of here, Tom darling," she replied.

"We've only a few moments – an hour, at most – left to live. Even if we kill or bind the torturers and even if the guards can't batter down the door, they can blow their sleeping gas in through the grill, and cut the door away while we're unconscious. We must be dead before they get us,Tommy dear." She stifled a low sigh. "It would be sweet to marry you," she added in a tear choked voice, "but the only sacrament which we can share is death."

Tom put his arms about her satin shoulders and held her close against him, comforting her as one would soothe a weeping child. "Listen, honey-lamb," he whispered, "we're not done for yet. I've got a hunch. Last night I went over this dump with a fine-toothed comb – all but this part. Are you with me?"

She rubbed a tear-stained cheek against his shoulder, then raised her face and looked at him. "What"– she began, but:

"Don't ask questions, honey-bud; bring the light and follow on," he ordered, holding her away and grinning down at her.

Together, hand in hand, they walked across the dungeon, paused before a low, barred door and fumbled at its fastenings. "Angel-pie, we're getting warm," he whispered jubilantly. "Feel that draft? See that candle flicker. I haven't felt a breath of breeze before since I came into this hell-hole!"

The door gave way beneath their pressure and before them rose a flight of spiral stairs, leading upward through a well no wider than a manhole.

Up, up they climbed, at last they reached an iron hatchway fastened with a massive lock. "No dice!" Tom muttered disappointedly after fumbling with the lock a moment. "Never mind, we're not licked yet; wait here; be with you in a jiffy."

Half falling in his haste, he dashed down the stairs, seized a heavy iron bar and rushed back to the waiting girl. "Stand clear," he ordered, "there's a cataclysm coming." Inserting the bar in the hasp which held the latch he wrenched and wrenched again, throwing his whole weight against it. The rusty iron screamed like a tortured living thing, then, with a snap like the discharge of a pistol, gave way suddenly, letting him fall sitting on the topmost step. "Damn!" he exclaimed involuntarily, as he rose and rubbed his bruised posterior, then forgot his pain as he forced his shoulder against the hatch and heaved with all his might. The trap-door opened, and a flood of gray, fog-filtered light fell on them.

On every side, stretching to infinity, it seemed, the grass-grown salt marsh lay while the lapping of the ocean sounded in their ears.

"Who says we won't stand up before the devil-dodger and tell him that we do?" he asked. "Tum—tum—te-*tum!*" he hummed the opening bars of the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin, then bent and kissed the girl upon the lips.

"Oh, my dear, my precious dear; it's too wonderful to be true!" she wept. "We were lost and are found; we were dead — worse than dead — damned! — and are alive again. Come, let's go quickly, dearest love!"

"O.K." he answered cheerfully; then: "Hey, hold on, baby, there's a guy back there I got to get — and we're no nudists; we gotta have some clothes!"

For the first time, seemingly, she realized her nakedness, and the bright blood stained her cheeks, but: "Send the police back for him," she urged; "if we wait —"

"And run the risk of that homicidal maniac bumping him off in the meantime? Not much! Come on, I've got a pip of an idea — if it works.

"You're sure you fed that snake a nice, big tummy-full of hashish?" he asked as they regained the torture chamber.

"Yes, he was perfectly quiet when I last looked in his den."

"All right, here's hoping he stays that way a little while. Help me truss these bozos up, will you, honey?"

THEY STRIPPED THE CLOTHING from the torturers, bound them fast and gagged them; then, as Carter clothed himself in the red garments which the torturemaster wore: "I'd better put the kibosh on those babies at the door," he told her, picking up a burning-iron and grasping it cudgelwise.

The guards came to attention as the door rasped open, raised their right hands in salute, and went down like a pair of pole-axed oxen as Carter swung his crowbar.

"All clear," he whispered as he dragged his victims in; "now for that sublimated fishing-worm of yours."

The giant reptile lay half coiled, its ugly, wedge-shaped head resting on a fold of its great body, only the rhythmic swelling and deflation of its barrel-like sides as it breathed showing it still lived. "In you go, old scout," Tom Carter told it, thrusting, tugging and hauling till he finished bundling the serpent in the folds of the red cloak which had adorned the torture-master's shoulders.

Two hundred and fifty pounds of snake is no light burden, even when it lies quiescent; when it wakes in outraged dignity and begins to writhe and force its mighty coils apart, to carry it is almost more than mortal man can do; yet Carter did it.

Hunched over like a peddler burdened with his pack, he bore

the squirming reptile up the stairs, traversed corridor on corridor, finally reached the throne room where the master waited for the majordomo to bring word Naa had eaten.

Guards at the door were startled as they saw the torture-master stagger forward with his burden and beheld the dancing girl who followed meekly in his wake, but none approached the Master save by his command – who were they to question the dread keeper of the dungeons? They raised their sabers in salute and held the curtains back.

"Ha, what is this? Why come you here, O monstrous vileness?" cried the man in red upon the scarlet dais as Carter staggered through the door. "Did Nazman send thee? Has Naa eaten?"

"Not yet, but in a minute, buddy," Carter answered, dumping his bundle unceremoniously on the throne room's scarlet floor and dragging back the hampering cloak from the great reptile's coils.

"Go to it, baby, dinner's on the table!" he invited, leaping back beyond the flailing of the python's tail.

Pandemonium followed chaos. Screams, curses, cries went ringing through the vaulted hall. A guard rushed at the python, simitar upraised. Like a battering ram the horn-hard nose of the great creature struck him down, and rippling like a hell-tide, it slithered over the red varnished floor – straight toward the red-robed man upon the scarlet throne.

There was a hiss like steam escaping from a safety-valve. A scream of mortal terror, ending in a strangled cry . . .

"H'm, he could dish it out, but he can't take it," Carter muttered; then: "Come on, Professor Merrill, scram! You, too, buddy, I need you in my business!" He seized Merrill by the arm with one hand, Max Mendelbaum with the other, and they dashed from that room where wild confusion reigned.

Hurrying guardsmen passed them on the run; none sought to stop or question them; everyone was rushing somewhere, and their haste occasioned no suspicion.

"Grab up some clothes for Mendelbaum," Carter ordered as they reached the torture chamber and barred the door.

Dale Carswell donned a torturer's red robe and skull-cap, Mendelbaum did likewise, and together they went climbing up the stairway of escape in frantic haste.

The tide was rising. Even as they reached the hatchway it was lapping round the coping, but they paid no heed. Splashing, falling, cutting themselves on the tough grass, they made their way shoreward, toward the ribbon of the South Road's pavement.

"Good Lord!" cried Carter as they halted for an instant to draw breath. "I forgot the hatch!"

Turning, he raced frantically back, fell, regained his footing and ran on.

In half an hour he rejoined them. "Too late," he announced briefly. "There's six feet of ocean over it by now. They were like rats in a trap."

Mendelbaum and Merrill looked conventionally grave.

Dale Carswell answered with a woman's ruthless logic. "I don't care. They deserved it — every one of them. That awful man they called the Master was like some dreadful spider, catching helpless, inoffensive people in his web, then torturing and killing them. The others were no better. It was an awful death they died, but if you only knew —"

"Baby, we know plenty," interrupted Carter as he took her hand to help her to the roadway.

"There's the tree where we met our Waterloo," he pointed to the big oak pollard standing by the highway. "I'm going to give it the once-over. I've got a hunch."

Up the bole he clambered, crept out on a limb that overhung the roadway, and began to shake it. "Heads up, here comes the phantom!" he announced. Dropping from the tree-branch, like a windowshade unfurled, came a sheet of thin metallic tissue, capable of folding to a compact cylinder, bright enough when hung across the road to reflect the headlights of a motorcar.

"Get it?" he asked as he rejoined them. "We saw our own reflection, thought we were going to have a collision, stopped, or ran off the road; then" — he made a pantomime of drawing a sack over his head— "next thing we knew we were nice, helpless

little flies in the Spider-Man's web. They had their scouts posted near the road, of course, saw a likely-looking car approaching, dropped the mirror-cloth, and –there you are. Dam clever people, these crazy men."

"Crazy?" echoed Merrill with a smile. "I should say –"

"Don't say it, Prof., you'd only have to take it back," Carter chuckled. "The Master was crazy as a fish out of water. I recognized him the moment I clapped eyes on him. He was Jacques LeGaie. You know, the feller who killed half a dozen people under the delusion he was Bluebeard reincarnated, escaped from Matteawan and tried to set up a kingdom of his own in Indo-China, and darn near got away with it –would have, too, if the French hadn't clapped him in the bughouse. He escaped from there, too, and disappeared. They say he had a couple of million dollars in gold coin cached away somewhere, and from the layout of that underground palace we just got out of, I shouldn't be surprized if he had. He was always fancying himself somebody's reincarnation, you know. His latest delusion must have been – what was his name, Professor?"

"The Sheik Al-Jebal," Merrill answered.

"Righto. Now get this: We don't tell anyone where we've been. If you do, we'll find ourselves inside some nice, comfortable padded cell, with visitors allowed Thursday and Sunday afternoons.

"Mendlebaum, you've had amnesia. You don't know where you've been or what you've been doing. If I ever hear of your telling about the Spider-Man and his underground kingdom – how'd you like to have me spill the story of how you drank a pailful of scrub-water and thanked the guy for ordering you to do it?"

"I wonder what time it is?" Dale Carswell asked.

"Can't say," responded Carter, "but my guess is it's early morning. "We'll be in Brooklyn in time for breakfast at the St. George, if a car comes along – and my thumb holds out."

You been to masquerade party, huh?" asked the Italian truck

farmer who obligingly halted at the sign of Carter's upraised thumb and agreed to take them as far as Jamaica.

"Brother," Tom assured him solemnly, "you'd be surprized!"

The fog lifted as they neared the city, and behind them came the faint glow of the rising sun.

"Oh, my dear," Dale leaned her head on Carter's shoulder, "after those dreadful days in that hell beneath the ground, you've no idea how good a little sun and air feels."

Carter drew her closer to him. "I've a five-thousand-dollar bonus coming for bringing Mendelbaum back alive," he told her, "and a vacation too. They'll come in handy for our honeymoon, darlingest. We'll have the other, too."

"The other?" her eyes were bright with adoration as she lifted them questioningly to his.

"Precisely, belovedest, what you just said — a little son and heir."

THE MAN WHO NEVER CAME BACK

(Continued from Page 75)

eyes that were filled with pity, they came and stood beside the bed. Herbie Tillson lay there, very white and very still. He was dead; they saw that at once—a crimson hole neatly drilled behind the left ear. He did not look at peace, for in the widely open eyes was something so unspeakably horrible that they could not look upon his face.

Molu, alone, was not moved to pity. Molu looked at the body of Herbie Tillson with hard, brilliant, black eyes. "No, him no come back," he stated, baldly.

The three men turned to him frowningly. Molu enjoyed the attention. "No," he explained, complacently. "Him no come back. White man think so, but black man know different." He pointed dramatically to the bare feet of Herbie Tillson, feet wet and stained with jungle earth, and shudderingly Bannister saw the foot with the six toes.

Molu went on in his soft voice, "Bendjabi know. Him in the great Swabi for always. *He never come back.*"

The *Astoria* came to Pambia. She took on the bales and barrels and boxes of the West Coast Products Company and left more bales and barrels and boxes when she sailed. And when the *Astoria* sailed, she took Herbie Tillson back to England, just as Bannister had said she would. For in the captain's vault was a small urn, chaste in shape and color, and containing all that remained of the man who never came back.

Coming Next Issue

I was shocked to see Sir Harold. Naturally we are all used to seeing the photographs of him in his prime, heavy-chested, his great shock of red hair flowing over his ears and joining his bristly mustache, and puffing majestically on a massive Oom Paul. He looked the very essence of the British gentleman. I was perfectly aware, of course, that the photographs had been taken about twenty years earlier, but I did not expect the course of time to have exacted so many ravages. His face was bare, and his head had a sparse tonsure of whispy white. He had a shawl wrapped about his knees, and sat in a wheel chair. His thick hands shook with palsy, and his eyes, once his most commanding feature, were vacant and rheumy. He was forty years old at the time of his fiancee's tragic death; he could now be no more than in his late fifties. He looked like an old man of eighty.

"I have decided," he said, watching his servant back out of the room, closing the partition doors behind him, "to publish my diaries for the years 1884 and 1885. They end the night Jessica, my fiancee, died. Will you handle the arrangements for me?"

"Of course, Sir Harold," I replied. "But surely there are others who arrange such things professionally; they would be more clever in these matters than I. I, myself, work through a literary agent."

"I have chosen you," he interrupted, "for several reasons." He wheeled himself feebly over to the bookcase, impatiently gesturing me down when I stood to offer my help. He took two handsomely bound books from a shelf, and wheeled back to the table, throwing them down. They sent up an impressive quantity of dust, arguing their antiquity.

"First," he continued, "you are presumably a researcher. As a scientist, you must see that these are published as records of scientific experiments. They must not be taken as fiction or romance. They are serious and not to be taken lightly. Second, I presume you are a gentleman. There are obviously, as in any diary, allusions to certain private matters that are to be deleted before publication. You will, I trust, see to it?"

"You may be sure," I replied. "But why, if I may ask, are you planning to release these diaries after all these years, if they contain valuable scientific matter?"

Sir Harold remained silent for a few moments. At length, when the silence had begun to be painful, he spoke. "You are getting too close. You fellows think that what you are doing is new and exciting, but let me assure you that we here at the Chelsea Society had done it all 15 years ago. We, too, were scientists and, like you, we toyed with things we were not properly equipped to handle. And you people are about to make the same mistakes that I did."

Don't miss this strange and absorbing tale

THE CELLAR ROOM

by Steffan B. Aletti

Inquisitions

I don't know how many of you, the readers, are cat people (humans who are or have been owned by cats), but there do seem to be a fairly large number of them among lovers of weird and fantasy fiction—enough so that a comment on Barbara Silverberg's anthology debut with *Kitten Caboodle*, a collection of feline fiction (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969; 204 pp, including a delightful introduction by Robert Silverberg; $4.95) belongs here.

Of the 22 items in the volume, 15 are stories (the rest being little-known poems about cats), and of those 15, 8 are decidedly of a weird or fantasy nature. Only three are stories that I had read before: Rudyard Kipling's ever-fresh, *The Cat That Walked by Himself*, from *Just-So Stories;* Stephen Vincent Benet's *The King of the Cats;* and Mario Brand's *The Spy*, from the 1964 *Analog*. All three well chosen.

New to me, and no less fascinating are: *Phut Phut Concentrates*, by Lilian Jackson Braun; *Smith*, by Ann Chadwick; *The Story of Webster*, by P. G. Wodehouse; the anonymous version of *The King of the Cats*, from which the Benet story is presumably derived; and *Space-Time for Springers*, by Fritz Leiber. The Wodehouse story takes first place in my affections—the old master of comedy seldom misses with me, and he certainly hit this time—while the chilling (but also humorous) tales by Leiber and Chadwick aren't too far behind. I do not mean, by this, to derogate *Phut Phut Concentrates*, which made a fine opener, but only that the others gave me still more pleasure. And the rest of the volume is quite good, to my taste.

The book has a fine jacket and is larded with splendid cat drawings by T. A. Steinlen, whose excellence with drawing implements is obviously second only to his love and knowledge of the Master Race. So if you are a cat person, I think you'll love this book; and you may agree with me that it will make an ideal gift for cat people you know who have not already snagged a copy.

This department will appear when we have material to put into it, and when there is space in the magazine for it—meaning that when a choice has to be made between leaving out a story and leaving out this department, the story will have priority. We'll be reviewing or commenting on or sometimes just mentioning books and various publications here; and while material relating to terror fiction will have top priority, we shall also include comment on such related subjects as horror and science fiction at times; mystery will be reserved for *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*. Just which books, just which publications are mentioned depends upon which ones I receive.

The "publications" to be mentioned are amateur periodicals issued by *aficionados* of this sort of fiction; I shall try at one time or another, to mention each title I receive and give you some

idea of the sort of content you will find within. The chief difficulty here is that these publications have small press runs and don't always have regular schedules; after all, they are published as a hobby. It might not always be possible to obtain a particular issue by the time a review appears in print; so for the most part, I shall not be too specific about material in a particular issue.

The Mirage Press (5111 Liberty Heights Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland 21207) has sent me a copy of their hardcover edition of *Dragons and Nightmares*, by Robert Bloch, 185 pages in attractive type, plus illustrations of medium excellence, for which they ask $4.00. The contents are: *A Good Knight's Work* (from *UNKNOWN WORLDS*, November 1942); *The Eager Dragon* (from *WEIRD TALES*, January 1943); *Nursemaid to Nightmares* (from *WEIRD TALES*, November 1942) and *Black Barter* (from *WEIRD TALES*, September 1943). These present the humorous, tongue-in-cheek approach to weird and supernatural themes that such authors as Thorne Smith and John Collier have done splendidly, others less well. While Bloch is not quite in their league in this, he is nonetheless far enough above mediocrity so that I don't hesitate to recommend his collection to anyone who enjoys this sort of thing. The edition is limited to one thousand copies, and considering what you would have to pay for crumbling copies of the separate magazines containing this material (if you could obtain them at all within several years' search), $4.00 is not as exorbitant as it might seem to be.

W. Paul Ganey (PO Box 601, Chambersburg, Penna. 17201) has sent me the second issue of his well-reproduced amateur publication, *WEIRDBOOK*, which might be called semi-professional in that he pays contributors $1 a page for either words or artwork, on publication. The publication is letter size, this issue has 32 pages, and the price is 75c per copy or 4 for $2.00. Issue number two contains stories by Joseph Payne Brennan, H. Warner Munn, Ray Jones, Leo P. Kelly, Walter Quednau, Charlene James, Timothy R. Allison, Larry Dworin, George T. Wetzel, and Robert E. Howard; poetry is by A. Arthur Griffin, Andrew Duane, Walt Klein, Walter Shedlofsky, and Janet Fox. The three old pros have the best of it this time.

George M. Stover, Jr. (509 Alleghany Ave., Baltimore, Maryland 20204) has sent me the first issue of his octavo-size, photo offset publication, *BLACK ORACLE*, which costs 25c and has 32 pages. (Type is very small.) This is mostly dedicated to weird and horror films, with a feature review of *Torture Garden*. Interesting, but the review tells so much that having read it, there doesn't seem to be much point in seeing the movie. (This is a very common fault with such publications, so perhaps a word to the wise might help future issues: Don't pre-empt a film you obviously consider worth seeing by telling all.)

Ann Dietz (655 Orchard Street, Oradell, New Jersey 07649), has sent me the first six issues of *LUNA MONTHLY*, a neatly offset quarto size publication of 32 pages which is 25c per copy, $3.00 per year via Third Class Mail ($3.75, First Class Mail; $4.75 outside North America via First Class Mail – you write to inquire about rates for Air Mail outside of North America). This is a publication of news and reviews, giving thorough listings of each current month's crop of fantasy and science fiction in both hard and soft covers, contents of upcoming issues of the various magazines, information on

coming events relating to conventions, conferences, and other gatherings of fantasy and science fiction fans, and reviews of books in the field. The Dietz's (Frank handles the three-times-a-year *LUNA* and the *LUNA ANNUAL)* are adept in amateur publishing and can be relied upon to maintain schedules generally and give you your money's worth of information not always easy to find elsewhere.

Vera Heminger (30214 108th Street SE, Auburn, Washington 98119) has sent me a couple of issues of *CRY OF THE NAMELESS,* 40 to 48 pages letter size, neatly reproduced. This publication is issued 8 times per year, and the charge is 40c per single copy or 5 for $2 (maximum subscription accepted). *Cry* is more specialized than any of the others above in that it is a long-standing fanzine of considerable interest to those "in", presenting a very wide variety of material, not all of it concerned with fantasy or science fiction; like many of the general fanzines it is also a journal of opinion. If you find one issue interesting, as you may, then it will not take long before you find yourself "in" with the running references, cross-correspondence, etc. RAWL

(Continued from Page 41)

Brooke realized this as well as myself. He cast me an agonized, despairing glance.

"God!" he groaned—and as though the word had been a prayer, instantly answered. Colchester, stumbled and fell.

A receding wave caught him, flailing wildly, and rolled him back toward the sea. An incoming breaker lifted him, whirled him along as lightly as any bit of flotsam, and hurled him against a ledge.

We paused, the water rushing around our legs. There was a soft, crunching sound as Colchester's head struck the solid rock. When the wave receded, it rolled his body with it—no longer floundering.

Silently, with one accord, not looking at the battered head, with its dank, dark-stained white hair, we waded into the icy water and drew the body ashore, high above the irregular line of driftwood which marked the limit of the tide . . .

As we hurried back along the shore, back to Irene and the girl I knew now was the only one in the world for me, the words of poor Marie Colchester drifted through my brain. "My father—God help him!" she had said.

God help him!

I found it in my heart to make that wish for the silent figure alone standing there on the rocky beach behind us.

The Star Chamber

As the poet said, the plans of mice and men gang aft agly. I haven't heard from the mice recently, but plans here went so far agly that the first issue of *WEIRD TERROR TALES* is just barely out as I have to close up copy for the second issue; there should have been about a month's leeway. As a result only a few letters have come in, but some of those few have been interesting. For anything like a reckoning on this issue, however, we'll have to wait until next time.

P. J. Andrews writes from San Francisco: "One of the reasons why I wouldn't mind settling out here is that I can find your magazines easier than I could in New York. And the first issue of *WEIRD TERROR TALES* was a very pleasant surprise; one bi-monthly *(MAGAZINE OF HORROR)* and two quarterlies *(STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES,* and WTT) means one issue of your revival pulps a month, with two appearing together a couple of times a year, if my arithmetic is correct. Of course, what I'd like better would be to see one title every month, so that you could rerun some of the good old longer novels, even breaking them up into four, or five installments if necessary in order to allow room for other material. But from what I've heard about the distribution problem, that wouldn't work – you couldn't get a long enough display period in too many parts of the country, even though a lot of stands only hold a magazine on sale about two weeks anyway. You're not the only one who suffers from that. I've negelcted *GALAXY* or *IF* at times, because I didn't have time to read then and decided to pick them up a couple of weeks later—and then found that nobody had them on sale any longer. And don't tell me all the copies were sold! Anyway, a couple of dealers admitted that a lot of digest size magazines are returned after a couple of weeks. They have do it. No room to display new magazines coming in unless the old ones are taken out. No place to store the old ones—and after a week or so these are 'old' as far as the dealer is concerned—so back they go as 'unsold copies'. And the same thing happens to your titles, I doubt not. This happened in New York City, but I'd be surprised if it doesn't happen just about everywhere . . .

"A good issue and a nice cover. The Finlay cover is one of his best drawings and I assume that you chose it because it could tie in so well with *The Dead-Alive* . . .

"What I found most interesting was the Poe story preceding the Lovecraft tale. Not only because both were particularly good examples of these two authors, and worth re-reading, but reading one right after the other gives you a very special opportunity to see some of the ways in which HPL was influenced by Poe. Both begin with brief psychological portraits of the narrator, for example. But where many writers and would-be writers who were influenced by EAP set out to redefine

the same type of narrator-characters that Poe used so often, and pretty much in the same way, Lovecraft is individual. As you say in your blurb, he very deliberately used himself in *He,* drawing upon actual incidents in his then fairly recent past. In other stories, his own predelictions, enthusiasms, hang-ups, etc., come through, but not always quite so intentionally. But he is never an *imitation* of Poe, or anyone else."

There's nothing fundamentally wrong with your arithmetic; that's the way one bi-monthly and two quarterly magazines in the same circuit should work out. Unfortunately, it doesn't. *WEIRD TERROR TALES* was fitted into an empty slot in our schedule, and the way that orbit works out, to shift metaphors, one or another title will appear each month for ten months of the year, but four times a year, another title will be matched with it. So there will be two months during the year when none of the three weird-fantasy magazines come out.

Mack Stoddard writes from Detroit, "You overlooked an interesting bit of side information relating to Schachner and Zagat's story, *The Dead-Alive.* This story was published in 1931, the year that the film version of *Frankenstein* appeared, and I agree with you that it would have been much better had the original novel been followed more closely. Boris Karloff was deprived of an opportunity to make a far better impact in his characterization of the unfortunate 'monster' than the watered-down script could allow. But that's not my point.

"The thing is, this Schachner-Zagat tale, relating to animating corpses as a source of cheap labor, was published in the April-May issue of *WEIRD TALES,* which went on sale in March, 1931. In the story, the plan is frustrated, and the

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chief antagonist acknowledges his defeat on the grounds that the world is not yet ready for his great (?) idea. But two months later, the June 1931 issue of *AMAZING STORIES* came out with a tale by Paul Ernst entitled *The Incredible Formula.* And that story tells what happened when the world *was* ready for the great (?) idea cited above, and the kind of world that resulted from using animated corpses for menial tasks.

Ernst couldn't possibly have been influenced by the Schachner-Zagat story, but just the same, he has written here what amounts to a sequel to it, taking place many years later. Of course, I don't know whether any of the three writers involved were actually inspired by the knowledge that there would be a movie version of *Frankenstein,* because there is no telling as to when the two stories were written. Both Farnsworth Wright and T. O'Conor Sloane were known for avoiding haste in getting accepted stories into print, and it could well be that both *The Dead-Alive* and *The Incredible Formula* were slumbering peacefully at *WEIRD TALES* and *AMAZING STORIES* respectively before the Karloff film was announced. When you really look into all the circumstances involved, a lot of connections which seem at first to be logical, because of the dates, turn out to be impossible after all.

"Back in 1931, when I first read the Ernst story, I thought surely that it had been inspired by *The Dead-Alive,* and I even wrote a letter to Mr. Sloane congratulating him and Mr. Ernst on *The Incredible Formula* and commending Mr. Ernst for carrying the idea forward in the science fiction manner. But the letter was never published, and I felt pretty disgruntled about it, particularly when month after month no letter by anyone else mentioned the point in print. If that had happened, I'd still have felt disappointed, but at least some indication that my letter wasn't printed because the editor already had a letter dealing with the same point would have been soothing. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that I never wrote to *AMAZING STORIES* again. Of course, later on, I *did* write letters to some of the other magazines, and I remember getting a very nice reply from Mr. Tremaine of *ASTOUNDING STORIES,* thanking me and regretting that he couldn't publish it because it was too long, but he agreed it needed to be long, so that he didn't feel he could abridge it fairly. Come to think of it, it was really a short article, but I didn't realize that at the time. Anyway, he took up one of the suggestions in it, so I felt lots better.

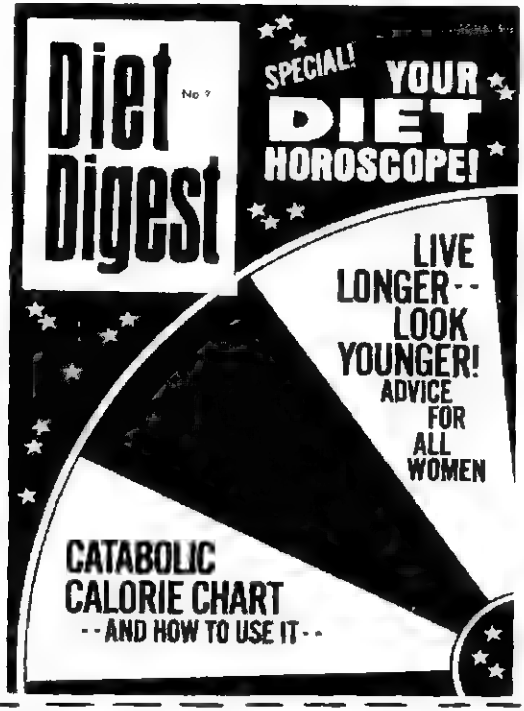
"Well, before this gets too long, I'll call a halt, but how about reprinting *The Incredible Formula?*"

Which just goes to show that even though my renowned memory for the old stories published in the thirties and late twenties works pretty well, there are things I do forget at times. Re-reading *The Dead-Alive* should have reminded me of *The Incredible Formula*—but it didn't.

I'd love to re-run it here, but stories originally published by *AMAZING STORIES* back in those days are not available to me.

Betty Shepard writes from New Orleans, "I've been trying for days to decide which of two stories in your first issue I like better and I can't make up my mind, so I'll have to mark a tie between *The House and the Brain* and *Mss. Found in a Bottle.* There must be a lot of readers like me who just don't seem to be able to get to public libraries or haven't the money to buy expensive hard cover books or just don't seem to find soft cover collections at the right time—they disappear almost as fast as

And Now We Present



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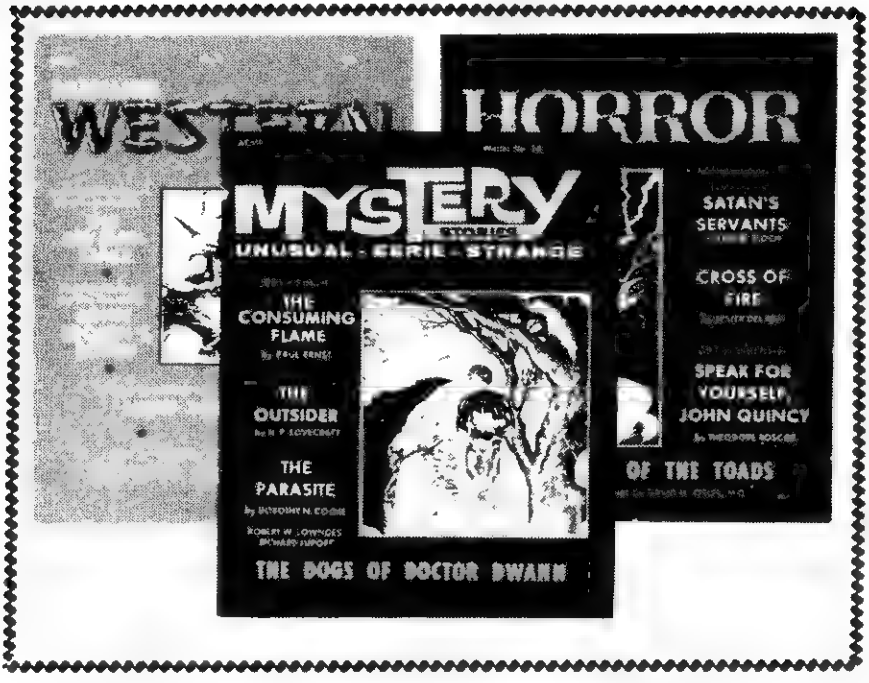
magazines, you know—so that I've never gotten my hands on a collection of Poe's stories or an anthology that had the Bulwer Lytton story. So for the sake of those of us who cannot be collectors like some of your readers, please do give us a story by Poe or one of the old masters now and then. All right, it doesn't have to be one of the ones which are reprinted all the time. I've read *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and you had *The Tell-Tale Heart* in *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*, which I found in a back issue store—don't frown, that's how I found out about your magazines, and I've haunted newsstands for them ever since—but I don't have the time to do the kind of hunting that the real fans do. So please give us one of the good old classics once in a while, won't you?

"I put *The Whispering Thing* in second place. Bertin's a new author, isn't he? I suspected that because there wasn't any copyright notice on the title page of his story. If I'm right, I hope you can get some more stories by him. And I think I'd put *He* as a close third. The rest of the stories were all right, but none of them except *Dead Legs* seemed to stand out over the others."

Every now and then we receive a letter like this one, which throws doubt upon the oft-repeated contention that we should not run the old classics because they are so easily available. Still, a very considerable percentage of our readers do seem to be well versed in the classics, and most naturally are not delighted to see space occupied by a story they have read perhaps several times before, and may already have in various collections, etc. So in my efforts to come reasonably close to pleasing all the readers, I'm not going to run an old classic in every issue—the Poe tale was selected for a specific reason—but you'll see one hereafter once in a while.



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THE EDITOR'S PAGE

(Continued from Page 5)

sort of universe, then, is full of attractive nuisances, calling us to climb over the fence, or break through it, or dig under it to see what's on the other side. And we're miserable unless we do—but if we do: *pow!*

Personally, I cannot accept the notion that there is any such thing as knowledge which can be used *only* in a destructive manner. I made this statement in 1968 in a comment in Richard Bergeron's fan magazine *WARHOON*, and Walter Breen took exception, citing knowledge of torture techniques. My reply (I don't recall now whether it was printed) was that knowledge of how to use any technique must necessarily include knowledge of how not to use it, how to avoid the effect that unintentional or accidental use would involve. If I know how, through the most sophisticated implements, to torture you, I also know how *not* to torture you; the knowledge in itself does not make me a torturer. And I may realize that the use of various implements which are not thought of as torture devices, and would not be used with that intent, could well produce the same physical effects. This, too, could be used either way.

It's even more so with psychological torture techniques. If I know something about this, and then learn that you have a hang-up about, say, black spirals on chinese red backgrounds (that really knocks you for a loop; chinese red alone just gives you an uneasy feeling), then I can torture you very nicely without laying a hand on you. But I can also avoid wearing my handsome chinese red necktie with black spirals on it, when you're around, because I don't want to torture you—and I realize that it isn't a joke.

And I think this type of answer

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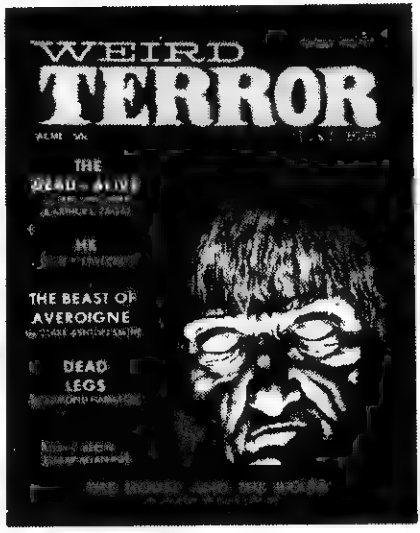

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applies to anything else which, on the surface, may appear to be exclusively evil or destructive in use.

You've read many awfully good stories on this forbidden knowledge theme, and so have I. Not quite so many are being written these days as of yore, but they can still be found. And one thing that bothered me back in the old days, long before I began to think about the metaphysics involved and the necessary logical conclusions to be drawn from them, was that even the most chillingly weird tale of this type was—in fact, had to be—entirely predictable, in that they all had to end the same way. Ghastly, terrifying punishment of some kind or another was visited in the end upon the person who dared to cross the barrier.

I remember back in 1936, when I first met Donald A. Wollheim, and, among other things we discussed Lovecraft, I mentioned that I'd like to write to HPL, but supposed he wouldn't have time, or care to, correspond with a fan. Don assured me that nothing could be farther from the truth, that HPL wrote more letters than stories and never tired of hearing from readers who he hadn't heard from before. So I finally wrote to him that winter, and in the course of my first letter told him what had bothered me about *At the Mountains of Madness,* and some of the other stories: that the discovery of the unknown always led to madness and destruction. Couldn't some unknown things possibly be beautiful, leading to greater happiness, etc.?

His reply was that such stories must have such an ending, because the universe was really a terrible place and only our relative ignorance and limitations made it endurable to us; to seek to go beyond these, to find the real nature of things, would inevitably be shattering. It is only our illusions of order and relative safety that protect us from madness. (This is, of course, a paraphrase of what he wrote me.) The essence of horror lay in abnormalities, in violations of what we consider to be natural law, dislocations of time and space, etc.

Well, there was no use arguing then mainly because I had nothing but feelings to go upon; but looking back upon it now, I'm ever fascinated by how this most materialistic and anti-superstition minded of highly literary authors could, at the heart of it, subscribe to the fundamental points of the religious doctrines: that *something* has laid down barriers beyond which man is forbidden to go without horrible consequences.

And when I got around to trying my hand at the Lovecraft type of story, I stuck by my guns. Awful things happened to some of the characters, of course, but *everyone* who had read the forbidden books was not destroyed nor turned into a monster. And while I still love HPL, I cannot but look at him as something of a vandal, at times—all those precious and priceless copies of the *Necronomicon* burned!

There is, indeed, terror and horror in the unknown. The way of the pioneer in psychic areas is no easier than the way of the pioneer in unexplored parts of Earth. Many explorers into the infinity of the human psychic unknown have not come back whole. Here alone is an area for terror tales without number; nor again, are all the secrets of Earth known, even if the land areas have been mapped out and photographed sufficiently so that it is at best unlikely that there are any Lost Worlds or Secret Hidden Cities, etc.

And the old subject matter: magic, contact with entities invisible, etc., is still good for stories. Even at this late date, good readable stories can be written following the formula. But just the same, I like to see truly weird, frightening, etc., tales which nonetheless do not require the same old coda. RAWL

Reader's Preference Page

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